

A man with a beard and dark hair, shirtless, is carrying a woman with long red hair on his back. The woman is wearing a vibrant green, strapless, floor-length dress and has her arms around the man's neck. She is smiling and looking up at him. The man is also smiling and looking towards the camera. They are in a lush green park with a blue sky and white clouds. In the background, there is a classical-style pavilion with a dome and columns. The overall scene is romantic and idyllic.

Surprise!
DUKES

THE
DUKE'S
COUNTERFEIT
WIFE

CAROLINE
LEE

USA TODAY
BESTSELLING AUTHOR

THE DUKE'S COUNTERFEIT
WIFE

CAROLINE LEE

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First edition: 2023

Printing/manufacturing information for this book may be found on the last page

Cover: [EDHGraphics](#)

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

SNEAK PEEK

ABOUT THIS BOOK

How did she end up make-believe married to the Grump Next Door?

Spinster scientist Felicity Montrose has always been as curious as one of her pet cats. So when her dark and dangerous neighbor catches her breaking into his house, her body's reactions to his manhandling raises all sorts of interesting questions. Unfortunately, the irritating man refuses to help her in her experiments to replicate these titillating sensations. *Blast.*

Griffin Calderbank is well aware that his enticing next-door neighbor is a lady, and thus so far off-limits she might as well be in Scotland. A man like him, a man who spent years fighting for his life and surviving with his fists, needs to focus on keeping his family safe. She's a dangerous distraction he can't afford, no matter how tantalizing her offer might be.

His hands-off policy is working well, right up until their children enter them into a contest to give him a chance at the inheritance long denied him. The only catch? He'll have to pretend to be a happy husband to the odd, but oh-so-tempting Miss Montrose. And this time, when she makes him a scandalous bargain, there's no point in refusing. After all, she *is* his wife, right? For a short time at least.

Soon, however, it's not just a dukedom on the line, but the very future of the country, as a hunt for a traitor turns deadly. How can he be expected to concentrate on such stakes when there's a brilliant, quirky scientist in his bed, offering him her cooperation in exchange for satisfying her...*curiosity?*

Warning: If sinful bargains, nerdy heroines and gruff heroes aren't your thing, you're in the wrong place. This one is smoking-hot, full of fun characters (and possibly too many felines), and laugh-out-loud hilarious. Promise!

For my mother, Marsha, because she would've laughed at all the jokes, even if she skipped the naughty bits out of sheer embarrassment.

I wish you were still here to read this, Muz. Love you forever.

LETTER TO THE READER

Hi, Friend!

Look, I like to think that by this point, my books have attracted a certain kind of reader; someone who is willing to allow historical inaccuracies for the sake of a fun time. Someone with a flexible sense of humor. Someone, in short, without a stick up their arse.

(Unless you're into that sort of thing; I don't kink-shame.)

That said...

The contest that is central to the plot of this book is completely inaccurate. Historically inaccurate, and also just plain ridiculous. It's impossible to choose a duke's heir by a newspaper contest. I know that, you know that.

That's the joke.

Buckle up, buttercup, you're in for a lot of fun!

PROLOGUE

GRIFFIN CALDERBANK FROWNED at the ridiculous advertisement plastered across the front page of his favorite newspaper.

His Grace, the Duke of Peasgoode, being of sound mind and frustratingly deteriorating body, has decided to eschew standard practice in choosing an heir. Having never married, and with no nephews, male cousins, or even particularly likable male second cousins, he will choose the next Duke from the following list of eligible names. Each of these men bears a relation to the current Duke through his mother or father's line, and should apply to the address listed below, should they wish to be considered. The successful candidate will prove a strong sense of familial bonds and loyalty, as family is what His Grace, the current Duke, values most, lacking it as he is. He understands there are some families in the world which resemble a pack of ravaging hyenas; these need not apply.

Fooking ridiculous. Still, Griffin couldn't seem to make himself fold the paper and toss it aside, as it deserved. *What kind of madman chooses his heir in such a preposterous manner?* His eyes were drawn down the list of names—at least fifty of them—which followed.

He was torn between horror and laughter, until his gaze landed on the second column, and he damned near choked on his tongue.

Sir Michael Comhard (the current duke's third cousin once removed)

George Stoughton, the Earl of Bonkinbone (the current duke's fourth cousin twice removed)

William Stoughton, his brother (same)

Arthur Wankum (the current duke's fourth cousin twice removed)

Griffin Calderbank (the current duke's third cousin once removed)

Now was the time to scoff, Griffin was certain.

And he would, as soon as he could breathe once more.

He recognized some of those names. He didn't *know* them, not personally of course, but some he knew were cousins of some sort. His father's mother had been a Comhard, and the Wankums were distant cousins on his grandfather's side.

But a *duke*?

Griffin shook his head, and finally tossed the paper down as it deserved. Should've thrown it into the wastebin, where it belonged. Or the fireplace. Or the Thames.

A *duke*. He snorted under his breath.

Being the only son of a country vicar, who himself was the younger son of a younger son of a baron, Griffin had been raised with a vague sense of gentility, and no money whatsoever.

It had been a bitch through school, but he'd made his way ever since. And now some fucking *duke* had the ballocks to claim they were related?

He snorted again, louder, and ran his hand through his hitherto neatly combed hair.

Sundays were his only days at home, and he should be spending them with his children. But Mrs. Mac—when she'd brought him his coffee and buns—had told Griffin he was the first one awake, and he'd been grateful for an uninterrupted hour to spend leisurely perusing the news.

Until *this*.

Now his coffee sat sour in his stomach, and he wished he'd never read the bloody thing.

But it had become a daily ritual, since his family's return from America, to scour the papers for hints into the

investigation against his old employer. The reporters at the *Daily Constitutional* had always seemed so level-headed, but this was nonsense.

A knock at his study door had him pushing himself straighter in his chair. “Come,” he barked.

His daughter poked her head through the door. “Good morning, Papa. Can we join you?”

“Aye, of course.” Assuming this meant Rupert was finally dressed and ready to leave, he gestured his children into the sparse room. “Since I promised we’d skip church this morning, would ye like—”

His plans bit off when he saw who followed Marcia into the nearly barren room he’d commandeered for himself when he’d chosen this townhouse six months ago.

Griffin’s lips turned down into a scowl. “What are *ye* doing here?”

“Good morning, Gruff,” the little shite declared, strolling into the room as if he owned the place.

Bull Lindsay lived next door, in a townhouse with an identical layout, far better furnishings, and a mother who didn’t share his last name.

An intriguing, *infuriating* mother.

One who made Griffin’s blood boil.

And yer cock hard.

The reminder wasn’t appreciated.

“That bloody door should’ve been plastered over years ago,” he muttered, ignoring the rude nickname the lad had taken to using.

“Aye,” Bull agreed cheekily, sauntering toward the desk with his hands in his pockets. “But the latch and hinges are on *our* side.”

Griffin’s palms slammed down atop the desk on either side of the damned newspaper. “Then yer *mother* should’ve plastered over the thing!”

“Da,” urged Marcia in a wounded voice, and when he glanced at her, she was doing that soulful-puppy expression.

He scowled and sat back.

His oldest child might think braids and freckles made her look sweet and innocent, but he knew better; she had too much of *him* in her to ever discount. Still, he despaired of her decisions sometimes.

Like her outrageously wrong choice for a best “friend”.

Anyone with eyes could see that Bull Lindsay was some kind of criminal-in-training, with the way his gaze flitted around the room, never landing on any one thing long enough to truly study it. His hands weren’t still either, despite being shoved into his pockets, and Griffin had seen him palm cards and small trinkets with a skill even Griffin couldn’t match.

And he’d been *trained* in larceny, for fook’s sake!

It didn’t help that the lad was handsome, in a foppish sort of way, and had a grin which would one day break hearts. But he was two years older than Marcia’s fourteen, and from the moment they’d discovered the secret door between their houses, they’d been inseparable friends.

Griffin hated the thought of this reckless charmer hurting his daughter, which is why he’d insisted Bull’s mother, Miss Felicity Montrose, close up the door.

And she, being as stubborn and infuriating as her son, had refused.

“Papa, Bull and I want to go for ice cream today.” His daughter’s request dragged him back to the here and now.

“We’ll take Rupert, too, dinnae worry,” Bull volunteered, eyeing the few volumes which Griffin had managed to salvage when he’d fled with his family to New York. Those books were precious to Griffin, and his palms curled into fists at the thought of someone else perusing them.

Christ.

The junior-larcenist-in-training from next door had perfected a look of innocence, and Griffin tried not to read too

much into the wee shite's nonchalance.

Ye're just projecting because ye ken ye cannae afford to take yer children out for ice cream.

It was true; money *was* tight. And aye, it was unlikely Griffin would be able to pay the rent on this townhouse for next quarter, much less Mrs. Mac's salary or the tuition for the school Rupert deserved...

But he would be bloody well castrated before he admitted that in front of his daughter's "friend".

"Aright," he agreed abruptly, rising to his feet and startling Bull, who'd been sidling nonchalantly toward the desk, an innocent expression on his face. "But only if ye prove ye'll be safe."

If his children were leaving this house, he was damned well going to trail them and assure himself they *would* be safe. If he couldn't reach them in time, he had to know they could care for themselves.

With a huge sigh and a roll of her eyes, Marcia planted her hands on her hips. "*Fine*. Although Bull won't let anything happen to us."

Griffin kept his opinion of Bull's fighting abilities to himself. "What do ye do if an attacker comes at ye from behind and grabs yer shoulder?"

Another irritated huff, and Marcia turned to Bull. "If you'll do the honors?"

For the first time, the lad looked uncertain. Wary, even.

Good.

"Come on, Marsh, no' again," Bull whined. "My arse still hurts from last time."

And now he deserved what was coming, simply for using the word *arse* in front of Griffin's daughter.

"Don't be a baby. Papa won't let us go, otherwise."

Now it was time for Bull to roll his eyes and sigh. But to give him credit, he stepped up behind Marcia and—even

knowing what was coming—clapped his hand on her shoulder. “Well, hello there, beautiful.”

Marcia simpered and batted her lashes ridiculously. “Oooh, I’m flattered.”

“Dinnae be,” Griffin growled. “And dinnae hesitate.”

His children *would* be safe. He demanded it.

With yet another sigh—teenagers were good at making adults feel like idiots—Marcia reached both hands for the larger one clapped on her shoulder. She twisted and pulled, at the same time turning and sweeping one foot out, and using her hip for leverage.

Bull flipped arse over teakettle and landed with an *oof* on the threadbare study rug.

Griffin resisted the urge to grin. Instead, he nodded solemnly to his proud offspring. “Well done.” If he hadn’t known how she did it, he would’ve missed it. “Ye’ve been practicing?”

Marcia was grinning as she reached down to help a still-groaning Bull to his feet. “Just as often as Bull will help me.”

“Usually I make her put down pillows,” the lad moaned, rubbing his lower back. “That’s no’ fair that ye can do that sort of thing in dresses.”

Marcia lifted her skirt slightly and stuck out a trim ankle. “I know. Will you lend me a pair of trousers?”

Bull had the sense to glance at Griffin, who was back to glaring at both of them, before hazarding, “I...dinnae think I should answer that.”

Griffin addressed his daughter. “Ye will only go to the shop around the corner, but ye may stop in the park as well.”

Her face lit in a smile, and she offered a curtsy which would’ve made her mother proud. “Thank you, Papa! Come on, Bull, let’s go find Rupert!”

But Bull wasn’t paying attention. He was leaning over Griffin’s desk. “What’s this?” The wee shite craned his head to

the side so he needn't read the headline of the newspaper upside down. "Some kind of contest?"

"It's nothing." Griffin picked up the paper, intending to toss it into the wastebin where it belonged, but the lad was faster.

Bull snatched it from his hand, offered a cheeky grin instead of an apology as he danced out of the way, then dropped his gaze to the article.

Before Griffin could reach him, the lad had darted behind Marcia as he read. "...*should apply to the address listed below*," he murmured, then sucked in a breath as his gaze skimmed over the words. "Did ye ken yer name's listed here, Gruff?"

"Aye," growled Griffin, "and dinnae call me that."

Instead of shooting back with a quip, the lad was focused on the paper. "Are ye going to write to this duke?"

Marcia stepped toward her friend. "What are ye talking about?"

"Nothing!" Griffin barked, glaring at Bull. "It is no' important. Toss it with the rest of the rubbish."

"Peasgoode, Peasgoode," muttered Bull, even as he folded the paper. "His estate's up near Mackenzie land, aye?"

The lad was Scots, for certain; the brogue had confirmed it the moment Marcia had introduced them after Griffin moved his family and their pitifully few possessions back from New York. There'd been no explanation for *why* Bull spoke with a brogue while his mother did not, nor why they carried different last names, nor why his mother seemed *awkward* around the lad.

But this was not a mystery Griffin needed to worry about now. Not while his family's future was in danger.

"How should I ken?" he growled in response to the lad's question. "I've never heard of the man."

A lie. Even younger sons of younger sons could marry a duke's granddaughter. But the relation was so tenuous, Griffin

had never thought of it.

“It says here...” The lad hummed as he tapped the folded paper with two fingers in that never-still way of his. “It says that if ye have a strong sense of family, ye can apply to be the duke’s heir.”

As Marcia gasped, Griffin stood, still holding his daughter’s hand. “I ken what it says, and I repeat: rubbish. *Rubbish.*”

The lad didn’t reply, but his gray eyes flicked to Marcia, then back to Griffin.

As if making a decision, the lad suddenly nodded briskly and shoved the paper under his arm. “Aye, rubbish.” He sent a wink to Marcia, which Griffin pretended not to see. “I’ll toss it in the bin on the way out.”

Griffin would’ve believed him, except he caught the way Bull tapped the paper with two fingers once more, then nodded somberly to Marcia. Worse than that was the way Marcia’s expression cleared from confusion to trust, and she nodded in return.

Whatever the lad was thinking, he’d more or less announced his intention to discuss it with Griffin’s daughter, and she *trusted* him.

“Look, ye little—” he began to growl, but Bull interrupted yet again.

“Dinnae fash, Gruff,” he announced cheerfully, giving a little wave as he backed out of the room. “Marsh, I’ll meet ye out front in a quarter hour?”

“Aye!” she readily agreed. “I’ll get Rupert ready too.”

Bull’s grin seemed mocking. “I’ll see myself out.”

“That door should be plastered over!” Griffin called as the lad ducked out of the door.

His own reply was a single hand that popped around the jamb long enough to give a cheeky little finger wave, before disappearing once more.

Griffin felt his muscles tense at the lad's disrespect. "That..."

"Da," Marcia prompted, patting him on the arm, "Bull's my friend. Even if he *hasn't* figured out how to land so his thigh takes most of the brunt."

Her comment deflated some of Griffin's irritation, and he blew out a breath. "Did I tell ye I was proud of ye?"

"No." She grinned cheekily. "But I know."

"Good," he said gruffly, pulling her into an awkward hug. "I hope ye understand why I make ye practice such things."

"Aye." Her voice was muffled against his chest. "You want to keep us safe. But nothing will happen to us, Papa. Mother's death was an accident."

Was it?

But all he replied was, "Ye're my family."

"I understand." She patted him once more, then pulled away from his embrace, grinning eagerly. "And I love you too, Papa. But now I have to go get Rupert!" she called as she all but skipped from the room.

She was so damned excited to spend a few hours eating ice cream with her friend and brother, who was *he* to stand in her way?

Ye'll stand behind her, in the shadows, protecting them. As ye always have.

At his sides, his hands curled into fists, the familiar pull of old scars more of a comfort than anything else.

His firm didn't pay him enough, and Blackrose was still at large, and he'd have to uproot his children once more soon enough. But no matter what happened, he'd keep his family safe.

He *had* to.

CHAPTER 1

FELICITY MONTROSE FROWNED and peered through the darkness at the secret panel leading from her study to the townhouse next door.

It was ajar.

Ajar, from an old Scottish word meaning “turned slightly”, although the knowledge did little to help her at this moment.

A sound from behind her made her start, but before she could turn, a familiar feline brushed against her skirts. “Hello, Cheeseburg,” she murmured. “I do not have a treat for you. Or any food, really, which makes it surprising you are here when you could be in the kitchens. Are you looking for Bull as well?”

She was new at this motherhood thing, but in the last few months, she had become used to sharing time in the evening with her son. Tonight she’d been engrossed in her laboratory and hadn’t realized the time. When she finally emerged, the house was silent, and Bull wasn’t in his chamber.

The study had been the next place she’d checked.

The door was ajar, which could mean any number of things:

1. She was being burgled.
2. One of Mr. Calderbank’s children had crept out of bed and slipped into her home.
3. The cats had developed the ability to hold down the secret button while lifting up on the hidden latch,

although that would indicate a surprising—and frankly alarming—level of cooperation among felines.

4. Bull had snuck out again.

Of the four possibilities, she preferred the burgled one.

Based on data collected, it is far more likely to be Bull's fault.

Not the first time she'd caught him using one of the secret doors—which she'd never opened, not once in her ten years of living here!—since he'd moved in. He'd developed a friendship with the children next door, and the three of them could often be found causing mischief or playing cards or even doing their schoolwork together.

But never this late at night.

With a sigh, Felicity dropped her arms from around her waist. There was only one thing for it. She was going to have to go after him. If Bull was, in fact, next door, she would have to fetch him before Mr. Calderbank discovered his presence and had him...

Well, frankly, she wasn't certain what the beast would do.

Stripes from a whip? Keelhaul on the Thames? Force Bull to walk the plank?

As far as she could tell, the man vacillated between “grumpy” and “angry”, with a dash of “cranky” thrown in. Since Bull had moved in, he'd had nothing kind to say to any of them.

And while she suspected that was mostly Bull's fault, Felicity knew he blamed her for refusing to board up the door, which opened from her side of the brick wall.

You are putting off the inevitable.

Right.

Taking a deep breath, she pulled the door open just enough to poke her head through. “Bull?” she whispered.

No answer. Blast.

The room on the other side of the wall was dark, of course. She'd only been in the home once, but knew the floorplan mirrored hers. The family which had rented it prior to the Calderbanks used this room as a library, but now...

The room was empty, and her footsteps echoed strangely on the wooden floor as she slipped inside.

Why would the room be empty? She knew Calderbank had recently moved from America, but did he not have the furnishings to fill the house?

"Bull?" Felicity whispered again, not really expecting an answer.

If he was in this house, he was almost certainly with Marcia.

And she didn't even want to think of the consequences of *that*.

Pressing her lips together, Felicity hurried across the empty room, and paused at the door to the hall. No light peeked from under any of the doors, but still she hesitated. Marcia's room would be upstairs. It was a gross violation of decency to be in this house, unannounced, at this hour, and it would be even more so to venture upstairs.

Perhaps it would be best to retreat to her own study, and wait for Bull there? She could light the lamps and be waiting, arms folded and foot tapping, when he returned. *That* would show him her authority wasn't to be trifled with!

Felicity's brief spurt of mothering—most of which she'd gleaned from women's magazines—faded as she glanced over her shoulder. She'd neglected to pull the secret door closed, which meant Cheeseburg—always on the lookout for food—could escape.

At that point she'd have more members of her household in Calderbank's house than her own, which would be silly, considering how little furniture the man owned.

Better to find her son as quietly as possible, then sneak back home.

Hesitantly, Felicity stepped into the hall, placing each foot down deliberately before committing to the next. Of course, if the floorboards squeaked, what was she expecting to do? Ninja-roll across the corridor, like a heroine in some sort of spy novel?

Do not be ridiculous, Felicity. You are a scientist, an innovator. You should not be sneaking about in dark corridors.

A noise to her right made her freeze, her breathing—even her heart!—still and silent. She stared wide-eyed into the darkness, knowing the staircase should be in front of her, waiting for monsters or bogeymen to emerge from nothingness behind her.

None did, and after about a million years, she allowed herself to breathe again.

Felicity, you have spent your life studying your cats. Felines move gently, but with certainty. Do that.

Right. Be like a cat. Be one with the cat. *Be the cat.*

She could do this.

Felicity rolled her shoulders, straightened her chin, and reached for where the banister would be. *Be the cat.*

But as her fingers closed around the carved wood, she was grabbed from behind.

She *might've* yelped, had her voice box not frozen in fear once again. As she was spun about and slammed against the wallpapered paneling, all she managed was a panicked little squeak.

Quite similar to a kitten's, she realized belatedly.

There was no time to consider this, however, before a weight settled against her, forcing her back—her shoulders, her rear end—against the wall, and a hand grabbed the hair at her crown. As her unknown assailant tugged her head back, a corded forearm thrust against her throat.

She didn't have time to worry about herself before a hushed voice hissed in her ear, "Damn ye, I'll *kill* ye if ye've touched her!"

Her chest began to burn from holding her breath. *He* was the one touching *her*, wasn't he?

Oh, yes, indeed, he was. She closed her eyes—not that it helped at all—and forced herself to inhale. Yes, this was definitely a man holding her; had the strength not corroborated her hypothesis, the faint scent of shaving soap and mint tooth powder would give her the data she needed.

Breathing too fast now, she opened her eyes and responded the way any normal, rational-minded person would, which was: “What?”

The man's hold on her hair tightened. “*What, ye bastard?*”

She swallowed past the impediment of his arm. “I mean, *what in the bloody hell are you talking about?*”

Despite her fear, Felicity felt a moment of pride that she'd managed to keep her tone steady. During the last years, she'd been working to keep her accent from her voice, and lately it only appeared when she was worried or stressed...but now it seemed as if she'd finally succeeded from banishing it completely!

Huzzah! Except for the whole *being-pinned-to-a-wall-by-a-stranger* thing.

To her surprise, her harsh language worked.

The man pinning her loosened his hold on her hair as he sucked in a surprised breath.

“A woman?” While he didn't release her, his forearm slackened a bit. “Ye're a woman?”

She *wanted* to make a cutting, sarcastic remark on his powers of observation, perhaps dubbing him *Mister Obvious*. But her tongue seemed to have become tied.

She forced herself to inhale deeply, hoping that would help.

Unfortunately—or perhaps fortunately, for her point—all the action did was thrust her breasts against her assailant's chest.

He cursed and leaned back as if branded.

But his legs and hips were still pressed against hers, holding her in place, and she felt the unmistakable sensation of his growing interest.

In the darkness, her eyes widened.

His erection pushed against her pelvis and evoked an immediate response in her, which she hadn't expected. Her own core clenched in response, and when she sucked in another breath and drew the twin scents of him into her chest, she made the most embarrassing little whimper in response.

And actually *flexed* her hips forward, cupping his hardness.

You are sexually aroused by a stranger who is groping you in the dark?

Oh dear. Perhaps she'd been spending too much time studying *A Harlot's Guide to the Forbidden and Delightful Arts*, or another of her illicit naughty books.

The stranger, meanwhile, had gone very still.

Now he cleared his throat. "I feel I need some clarification. Ye are, in fact, a woman?"

"Yes." She swallowed, easier now that his forearm rested against her collarbone instead of her throat. "Unless you are regularly burgled by men in gowns?"

She felt him laugh—or rather, she felt his quick exhale, that thing Bull sometimes did to show something was amusing without actually having to laugh.

"Madam," he intoned, finally straightening away from her. "I wouldnae put it past him."

Him. Her assailant had thought her a specific person.

Strangely bereft now his hardness no longer pinned her against the wall, Felicity fought for equilibrium. She tried for her haughtiest tone when she sniffed and lifted her hand to her ruined braids.

“Sir, I would advise you to vacate these premises immediately. I know the owner would take great personal offense at being burgled.”

“Och, do ye?” He drawled. Although he no longer pressed his body against hers, she could feel his hand on the wall beside her face, feel the way he leaned forward. “How well do ye ken the owner, lass?”

She shivered.

“Not well—I mean, quite well. Yes, yes indeed. Mr. Calderbank and I are on quite good terms.” Lies upon lies. The man abhorred her. “I know for a fact he would respond most vigorously to a housebreaker.”

“Vigorously? Mayhap ye *do* ken him. Why are ye here, lass? A bit of house-breaking yerself? Ye’ll find nae jewels or fine art.”

Well, of course she wouldn’t; the walls were as bare as the rooms. But Felicity merely sniffed, pretending outrage. “I most certainly am not a housebreaker, sir!”

When he spoke, she felt his breath upon her lips. “Neither am I, lass.”

There was something...

She needed to respond...

Words.

Forming words....

Hard.

All thought had left her at the realization of how close his lips were to hers.

She could lean forward and touch him. Kiss him.

This unknown man who’d attacked her, who intended harm, who’d somehow raised these feelings she hadn’t experienced in too many years.

Are you mad? Why would you want him to touch you further?

Yes, yes, she was mad. That was the issue. Her core still throbbled in need, and she was considering kissing a man just because she liked his scent.

Madness, indeed.

Perhaps, when you are once again safe in your chamber, you should consider picking up The Harlot's Guide and taking care of this little nagging distraction yourself.

“If ye’re no’ a housebreaker, madam, why are ye here?”

His question startled her, and she clamped her lips down on a squeak. “I do not have to explain myself!”

“I think ye do. I should apologize for mistaking ye for that miscreant, Bull Lindsay, but ye still owe me an explanation—”

“Bull?” she gasped. Just like that, Felicity’s ardor cooled. “You were planning on attacking my *son* in such a manner?”

The man in front of her had gone very still. “Miss Montrose?”

There was something about his tone... “Mr. Calderbank?” she guessed, nearly groaning in pained realization.

And from the empty study came the perfectly timed call: “Mother?”

The lantern Bull must be carrying threw the hall into shadows. As he stepped through the door into the corridor, Mr. Calderbank—for it was, in fact, he—stepped back, away from her.

Felicity’s eyes widened at the sight of a knife, its blade catching the light from the lantern, disappearing into the man’s sleeve’s.

Had he been holding a knife to her this entire time?

“Flick?” Bull’s tone sounded as if he was fighting back a smile as he called her by that ridiculous nickname. “What are ye doing here?”

Terror and arousal and exhaustion warred in Felicity’s mind, such that all she managed was a huffed, “Looking for you.”

“Ah.” Bull’s gaze flicked to Calderbank and back. “I wouldnae use the secret door after hours, Mother.”

“Ye shouldnae use it at all!” Calderbank burst out, taking a step toward the lad, who merely raised his chin. “The damn thing should be plastered over!” he growled, turning back on Felicity.

She flinched, suddenly so overwhelmed she wasn’t certain how to respond.

Mr. Calderbank had always struck her as dangerous, with his dark hair and darker scowls. He had a way of looking at the world that reminded her not even a little of the clerk he claimed to be. What kind of clerk accosted suspected housebreakers with a *knife*?

Indeed, she’d had no interest in getting to know the grumpy man next door any better...until he’d pressed her against a wall and she’d caught a whiff of his shaving soap, and now she was looking at him in an entirely different manner.

An entirely inappropriate manner. He’s still a thoroughly unlikable man. Look at how he’s glaring at you, merely because you have thus far declined to limit Bull’s access to his best friend?

But all she could manage was a whispered, “I’m sorry.”

Both of them seemed to guess she was overwhelmed. Bull stepped forward, reaching for her, at the same moment that Calderbank stepped back, exhaling a low curse and running his hand through his dark hair.

Felicity averted her eyes from the bulge in his trousers and turned to her son, hoping she wasn’t going to expire from embarrassment. “I could not find you, Bull. The door was open, so I was afraid...”

Her son offered a crooked smile as he extended his arm to her. “I came back through before dinner. Perhaps I dinnae close it tightly enough.” His grin turned mocking as he glanced at his nemesis. “If ye find a cat wandering about, have

Marcia capture it humanely, aright? Nae telling how many have slipped through.”

Her knees turned to jelly when the man growled, “Get out of my house.”

Bull’s salute was cocky and entirely uncalled for, but he turned them both toward the empty room which led to the secret door.

“You should not antagonize him,” she scolded under her breath.

He glanced down at her—yes, her son was taller than her, which was frustrating—and his grin flashed in the light from the lantern. “And *ye* shouldnae creep about his house in the dark, Flick.”

It was clear he didn’t respect her as his mother.

And, damnation, but his reasoning was sound.

So she pressed her lips tight and didn’t breathe easily until she’d shut the secret door behind them.

What was that all about?

She should have been terrified of the man.

He was rude, crude, off-putting and testy. Tonight’s interaction hadn’t done a thing to convince her Mr. Calderbank was a gentleman. He’d physically accosted her, pinned her to the wall with his body, and held her at knifepoint. With an erection.

So why in the world was she suddenly desperately curious about him?

Blast.

She was a *scientist*. When faced with a quandary, there was only one acceptable solution: she needed to experiment.

Experiment with Mr. Calderbank?

No, no, do not be silly.

But now she’d thought of the dratted idea, she couldn’t convince her mind to release it. Was it *only* Calderbank’s scent

which aroused her? Or did she enjoy his overwhelming physicality? Or was she so desperate, *any* man could make her feel this way?

Double blast.

She needed to solve this problem.

What was the likelihood she'd be able to convince the Grump Next Door to help her?

Improbable.

CHAPTER 2

GRIFFIN SHIFTED his briefcase from one hand to the other and rolled his shoulders as he *finally* stepped onto his street. The square had a cheerful park in the center, but the summer sun was low enough to throw shadows amongst the bushes and trees.

He was too tired to appreciate it.

He was too tired to appreciate *anything*, it seemed.

Christ, who would've guessed that nine hours behind a desk could be as exhausting as going nine rounds with some instructor Blackrose had hired? If someone had told Griffin that, back when he was busy getting his arse beaten, he would've laughed.

But now, his fists practically *ached* for the chance to be used.

Although he'd be hard-pressed to choose a target; Blackrose's nose, or Griffin's boss.

"Ye ungrateful bastard, at least ye have a job," he muttered, scrubbing a hand across his face as his house came into view.

Aye, the venerated accounting firm of Cooke, Books & Steele was well-known, and he'd been lucky to leverage his former employer's letter of recommendation into a position when he'd returned from New York. But Kermit Steele was a tight-fisted old miser, and had hired him at half-pay for the first two quarters.

Which meant that Griffin's family was living on his savings.

Which meant in a few months they'd be up shite creek.

"Fook," he mumbled, and when he received a glare from the nursemaid pushing a pram, scowled in return. He didn't need to impress these people; he'd only chosen the neighborhood because it was quiet and safe, and not at all the sort of place he'd lived when he'd worked for Blackrose.

Aye, if the bastard had a mind to find him, to hurt his family again...Griffin wanted to make it as difficult as possible.

Unfortunately, when he'd chosen *this* particular townhouse, sight unseen, he hadn't realized it was next door to...

With a sigh, he tipped his head back to stare up at the edifice of his next-door neighbor's home. Everything he'd been able to learn said that Miss Felicity Montrose had lived there for ten years—since she'd come to London from parts unknown—and had obviously made it into a home. Colorful flowers bloomed in the window pots, the paint was in good condition, and generally the place had an air of gentility, maintained by an army of servants only the rich could afford.

And then there was the Calderbank home.

Nay, no' a home. A house. Just a house.

His lips turned down in a snarl, Griffin stomped to his steps. They weren't dilapidated—he wouldn't have chosen an unsafe home for his children and Mrs. Mac—but it was obvious to a passerby the place was a rental. No personality, no appeal.

Why the fook are ye complaining? Ye didnae want it to have a personality. It's a bloody house!

He paused, hand on the front door, and glanced at his neighbor's home once more.

Miss Felicity Montrose.

By God, she was... He'd thought her socially awkward, a frightened little mouse, always scurrying from him when he'd demanded she plaster up that fooking door.

But last night...

Last night...

He didn't know how to finish that thought, but his cock stiffened at the reminder.

He'd threatened her. He'd pressed her against the wall. He'd felt *all* of her.

And he'd felt her response to him, even before she'd known who he was. He'd *felt* her, not just against him, but *in* him and *with* him and—

And ye're sounding ridiculous. Get over it. Go upstairs and frig yer hand again, like ye did this morning, and perhaps ye'll be reasonable company at dinner.

Thank fook neither of his children were old enough to wonder at his distraction.

Because just the *thought* of the way Felicity Montrose's breasts had felt, pressed against him...

With a growl, Griffin wrenched open the door. "I'm home!" he bellowed as he tossed his hat onto the rack, the announcement more for Mrs. Mac than the children. The nanny-turned-housekeeper knew to hold dinner until his return, and would even now likely be bustling about to finish preparations.

"Father!"

He managed to drop his briefcase in time to catch his son, who'd barreled down the steps into him. "Whoa, where's the fire?"

"Upstairs!" Rupert blurted with a grin. "But it was a small one, and Marcia helped me put it out."

Griffin frowned, even as he turned them both toward the kitchen. "I dinnae ken if I approve of a course of study which involves setting things on fire."

“Father, it was just a little fire. I needed to see if Joules’ studies on the transfer of heat through matter could be replicated with base materials.”

Ten-year-old Rupert was a genius, as far as his father was concerned, but a bit single-minded when it came to his engineering projects or anything involving an encyclopedia. He deserved the best teachers in the country, but for now he’d have to make do with the second-hand books Griffin had scrounged for him. “And Mrs. Mac approved of this experiment?”

His son shrugged off Griffin’s arm. “No, and she scolded me twice already, so you don’t have to. Marcia was looking for you!” he called as he ducked into the dining room.

Griffin turned to watch him go and was surprised to see the table set. Usually the four of them ate in the kitchen, to make life easier for Mrs. Mac. The dining set had belonged to his wife’s family, and it was one of the few useless pieces of furniture he’d bothered to sneak out of England when they’d fled.

Mary would have appreciated the fact her children still used it, but something about the room tugged at his attention.

“Papa, there you are!”

He turned to see Marcia hurrying down the steps toward him. His brows rose when he took in her appearance. Last year, when he hadn’t been so concerned about conserving money, he’d taken the children to the New York ballet. The pink silk concoction she now wore was the dress he’d purchased for that occasion.

He knew for a fact his daughter hated it.

“Ye look lovely, sweetheart.” He greeted her with a kiss on her forehead. “Is it yer birthday I forgot, or Rupert’s?”

“Neither,” she giggled. “I just wanted to look nice tonight.” When his gaze slid back to the dining room, she took his hands and dragged his attention back to her. “Could you please change into your dinner jacket?”

He glanced at his suit. Perfectly acceptable for an accountant's clerk, or a simple family meal. "What's wrong with what I'm wearing?" And since when did *Marcia* care about his appearance?

"Nothing's *wrong*, Papa, I just want...tonight to be special." She blinked those big blue eyes up at him. "Please, Papa?"

Well, shite. How was a man supposed to trust anything asked in that syrupy sweet tone? This whole thing was suspicious as hell.

His stomach rumbled, but he figured whatever his daughter had planned, he'd be able to eat sooner if he went along with it.

"Aye, fine," he grumbled. "But just the jacket."

When she smiled, her entire face lit. Everything about her appearance—from her round cheeks to the dimple in her chin to the gap in her front teeth—reminded him of her mother, Mary. But when it came to cunning, she was most definitely his child.

"Thank you, Papa! I knew I could count on you!" she declared, then lifted up on her toes to press a kiss to his cheek before darting off toward the kitchens.

Hopefully to help Mrs. Mac. His stomach growled again as he stomped up the stairs, already loosening his necktie.

This wasn't the first time Marcia had roped him into one of her fancy dinners or tea parties, although it *was* the first time in at least four years. He'd never known Rupert to go along with them so readily, but perhaps the lad was growing up a wee bit.

Or perhaps Marcia and Mrs. Mac have conspired against the men in the household. Rupert would do anything for one of her plum cakes, as would ye.

And Griffin knew, as well as Marcia, that he wasn't going to *just* change his jacket. A dinner jacket required black trousers and a nicer waistcoat, and he might as well change shirts while he was at it.

He did, then he rolled up his sleeves to scrub his face. As he was drying his hands, his eye was caught by a particularly vivid scar across the back of his third knuckle on his right hand. Reflexively, he rubbed the pads of his first two fingers across the mark, remembering how he'd received it.

The skin had broken open against his opponent's forehead, a poorly placed but desperate blow. As the blood had bloomed from the cut, Griffin had ducked a blow from the man's partner, then rolled to avoid a jab from a blade.

He blinked down at the mark, the last one he'd received while working for William Blackrose.

His hands—and the rest of him—were covered in scars from his time as a fighter in what he had thought was service to the Crown.

But the scars he carried on his soul were far worse.

With a sigh, he flexed his hands once, twice, then tossed the towel over the bar. *Ye're out of it for good, laddie, and yer family is safe. What more can ye ask for?*

Blackrose wasn't dead.

And until Blackrose was dead, Griffin would protect his family from the bastard.

Unlike last time.

Rolling his shoulders, he fought down the urge to growl out a curse, and instead shrugged into a dark waistcoat and hung a necktie around his neck. Where the hell was his dinner jacket? He hadn't worn it since they'd returned to London—hadn't had a reason to—but Mrs. Mac would—

The front bell interrupted his thoughts, and he froze, his fingers stilling in the process of buttoning the waistcoat.

Who would be calling? Thorne was the only one who knew Griffin's location, and he usually sent word before he arrived.

It's a delivery. A telegram, perhaps.

Or Blackrose.

Jaw set, Griffin whirled for the door, snatching up the lower-back sheath for the daggers he'd plunked on the nightstand as he'd entered. He pounded down the stairs, willing neither of his children to step into the foyer as he belted the sheath around his waist.

His family knew they weren't allowed to answer the door without him—that's why the damned secret panel to the house next door was so galling—so luckily, they stayed away.

He paused at the front door, shifted his shoulder, feeling the sheath and the blades fall into place at the base of his spine.

Then he reached for the latch.

Standing on the doorstep, mid-whispered-argument, stood Bull Lindsay...and his mother.

Both were surprised by him pulling open the door—what, were they expecting a butler?—but Bull's expression quickly slid into the easy grin of his that in a few years would either get him married or a broken nose. Probably both.

But Felicity...Felicity just stared.

Not in a, *Oh my stars, what kind of gentlemen opens the door himself* or *Oh my stars, he's half-dressed and I can see his forearms, fetch me my smelling salts*, but rather a different kind of stare.

A *hungry* kind of stare, her green eyes wide behind those spectacles.

Felicity—and it was impossible to think of her as *Miss Montrose* when he'd felt her breasts pressed against him—dragged her gaze from his eyes to his shoulders, lingering on his jaw, then down his arms.

As she studied his bare forearms, he could *feel* the heat from her gaze.

His hands curled into fists, the old scars stretched...and the movement drew her attention lower.

When his cock jumped in his trousers, he could *swear* she was looking at it.

Christ on the Cross, who is this woman?

And then her tongue darted out across her lower lip, an innocent little movement that nonetheless sent him throbbing.

Why was she here? Did she ring his bell to ogle him? With that naïve innocence, as if she didn't know what she was doing to him? Had she forgotten the threat he'd posed last night?

Had she forgotten how he'd *felt*?

Griffin's gaze darted back to her son, who was watching them both with a little smirk. What was it Bull had said last night, as he'd escorted his mother home? Something about one of the cats getting away?

Was that why they were here? One of the woman's ubiquitous cats had escaped, and they thought the beast was in *his* home?

He turned his glare back to the red-headed beauty, whose cheeks were beginning to match her hair, and he growled.

Aye, it was a growl, and aye, it was effective to draw her attention away from the bulge in his trousers.

Was she here because of a missing feline? "I dinnae have yer pussy."

She blinked, almost owlshly, behind her spectacles, then cocked her head to one side and blurted, "Would ye like to?"

CHAPTER 3

OH.

Oh, no.

Felicity's eyes widened as she realized what she'd said. Her hands shot out in front of her, patting the air between her and the dangerous man standing in the doorway. *As if that would possibly help.*

"I—!" *Oh, goodness.* "I just meant...the cats!" She was making a hash of this. "If you would like one, I have plenty! I am certain your children would enjoy having a pet—"

She broke off with a groan as one of his dark brows rose.

God in Heaven, how could such a threatening man look so *enticing?*

There is something wrong with you, clearly. That is the only explanation. You must take to your bed for a bit. Bring one of your naughty books.

This time her groan was a little louder, and she was mortified by how *needy* it sounded. Abruptly, she turned about and would've hurried down the steps—and back to the certainty of her home—had Bull not grabbed her elbow.

"Flick?"

She turned to glare at him, almost grateful for a chance to take out the anger at herself on someone else. "I am your *mother!*"

A flicker of uncertainty passed across his face, and she felt the tension ebbing from her shoulders. Bull was such a strange creature, this boy she'd birthed so long ago. She'd missed him fiercely when she'd had to give him up, and their years apart had changed him from the laughing, bright-eyed bairn he'd been.

But that lad was still in there somewhere. He was just hidden by the fierce mask of affability he'd cultivated in the last decade.

After months together, she still felt as if she barely knew him, but she loved him.

His expression had softened. "Aye, *Mother*. But dinnae run away yet, eh?"

Keenly aware of the man standing behind her, Felicity lowered her voice to hiss, "I *knew* this was a bad idea. I should not have accepted his invitation."

Her son winced at the same moment the grump behind her growled, "*What?*"

Taking a deep breath, she straightened and turned back to face him, her fingers plucking at the ornamentation of her jacket as a way to dispel the nervous energy. "Thank you very much, Mr. Calderbank, for your dinner invitation, but I am afraid—"

"I didnae invite—" he began, then cut off with a growl as he glanced down at his half-buttoned waistcoat. "*Marcia*."

"Yes, Papa?" Bull's best friend suddenly appeared at her father's side, grinning innocently. "Oh, hello, Miss Montrose! Hello, Bull. Dinner is ready."

"*Marcia*," her father growled again.

The girl ignored him, sending a wink Bull's way.

With a sigh, Felicity turned back to her son. "Bull, it is obvious the invitation you extended was not from Mr. Calderbank."

The lad just shrugged, not appearing at all bothered by being caught in the lie. "I kenned ye wanted to apologize, so

Marcia and I arranged—”

“Ye wanted to apologize?” the Grump Next Door rumbled. “For what?”

Wasn’t it obvious? Flustered, she turned back to him, her hands flapping awkwardly as she tried to wave away the uncertainty. “For—for breaking and entering! Last night, in your house—”

“Ye didnae break in. Yer disreputable son left the door open.”

“Excuse me!” She drew herself up, her awkwardness narrowing to a focus. “Bull is not *disreputable*. He is free-spirited, and he has a right to visit with his best friend—”

Mr. Calderbank’s finger jabbed toward her chest. “It isnae safe, to have unbarred access to yer home! Ye should do the right thing and board that damned thing over!”

She opened her mouth to snap back—it wasn’t as if they hadn’t had this argument before—but the way he’d phrased it made her hesitate. He was...*worried*? Worried about Bull, or afraid of something else?

It was Marcia who broke the silence. “Papa, I invited Bull and his mother for dinner tonight, because I knew *you* wanted to apologize.”

Blue eyes still glaring at Felicity, Calderbank asked his daughter, “Why would I want to apologize?”

“Because of what happened last night.” The girl’s tone was steady as she placed her hand on her father’s arm. “Bull told me. I *knew* you would want to apologize.”

His jaw worked for a moment. Then he barked, “I’m sorry.”

His daughter’s shoulders slumped with a sigh, and he glanced down at her. Something changed in his expression, then he rolled his eyes and sighed. “Oh, for fu—*Fine*. Ye’ve set this whole thing up, caught me neatly in yer trap, eh?” He turned a glare on Bull, but it seemed half-hearted. “Nae use standing on the front steps, arguing. Come and eat.”

Then he shook off his daughter's hand and stomped back up the stairs.

Felicity, peering into the house's interior, watched him go. She told herself she was examining the strange leather belt—and the dirk it held—the man was wearing and not his rear end.

She almost believed herself.

Marcia stepped into the middle of the doorway and gestured welcomingly. "Don't mind Papa, that's as friendly as he's likely to be. Come in, come in. Dinner's ready!"

Felicity exchanged a glance with her son—hers uncertain, his cheeky—before nodding slowly. They *had* been invited; not the way she'd thought, from Bull's message, but Mr. Calderbank's *come and eat* command was impossible to deny.

And...she *wanted* to go in, wanted to eat with him. Wanted to *study* him, as if he were a new subject she could capture on her film.

You just want to look at him.

Well, yes.

So she lifted her chin and offered the girl a small smile. "Thank you. I think that would be...best."

Bull took her elbow and helped her up the last steps, as if she hadn't survived on her own without a man for a decade, and she thought she heard his soft snort.

She was new to this parenting thing, but ignoring a teenaged boy's snorts seemed the smartest course of action.

The Calderbank house was a mirror of hers, so it was no surprise to follow Marcia to the dining room. What *was* surprising was the lack of ornamentation on the walls or—*or* anywhere, really. The dining room contained only the table and chairs, set with lovely, although modest, tableware.

"Sit, sit," called Marcia happily, bouncing to the other side of the table. "You know my brother, Rupert?"

The lad stood behind a chair beside her, and when Felicity smiled to him, he bobbed his head in a solemn nod, then pulled his sister's chair out for her. As Bull did the same for Felicity, she murmured her thanks, her attention on the siblings across the table.

“And how old are you, Rupert?” she asked brightly, aware of how brittle she sounded, but having *no idea* how to speak to a lad his size.

“I'm ten,” he replied gravely, looking far too grown in a too-tight suit. “Although Father says I'm bright for my age.”

Felicity hummed as she reached for her napkin. “I am certain you are.” She wasn't certain, not at all, but having no idea how bright ten-year-old boys *normally* were, she had no way to counter the lad's claim. “And I assume you enjoy... um...poking frogs, falling out of trees, lighting things on fire, that sort of thing?”

The lad cocked his head at her. “Why in the world would I want to poke a frog?”

She was on shaky ground here. “Um...to see what makes it go?”

“Frog locomotion is achieved by contracting the extensor muscles in their long and powerful hind legs. The sudden movement thrusts the foot—which itself is long and webbed, for better purchase—hard against either the ground or the water. Thus, the frog could be said to ‘leap’ on land or while swimming.”

The lad nodded, satisfied, and Felicity couldn't help but stare in amazement. She was impressed by young Rupert's grasp of biological mechanics *and* his memory.

Marcia leaned forward to join the conversation. “Rupert is a bit of a genius. Engineering, biology, far too much history. He doesn't care at all about current events.”

She said that as if it were a grand personal failing on her brother's part.

Beside Felicity, Bull had slid into his own chair. “Marcia has firm and virulent opinions about the state of the world and

women's place in it."

"You say that as if it's a bad thing." Marcia sniffed and shook out her napkin. "But it is the responsibility of every woman to *fight* for equal representation, equal pay, and would it kill them to give us more pockets?"

Felicity pressed her lips together to hide her smile at such far-fetched notions, and nodded solemnly. Her spine was as straight as it had been at any of her parents' dinner parties, years ago, and vaguely she wondered why she was trying so hard to impress these children.

"See?" Bull mock-whispered to her, even as he sent a wink to Marcia. "Virulent."

Luckily, Felicity was saved from having to answer by the entrance of the shortest, roundest woman she'd ever seen. Both Marcia and Bull brightened at the sight of the platter the woman held.

"What do ye have for us tonight, Mrs. Mac?" Bull asked, already reaching forward to clear a space for the platter.

It was Marcia who answered. "Roast chicken!" She sounded almost *proud* of the meal. "Rupert helped with the potatoes, but *I* made the bread!"

Bull grinned. "Then I ken it'll be delicious! Here, do ye want me to carve?"

He was already reaching for the knife. It was uncommonly rude, but since Mr. Calderbank still hadn't joined them, and since this was clearly an informal meal, Felicity couldn't really object.

Instead she turned to the woman who was tucking the lid of the platter under an arm. "Thank you...Mrs. Mac?"

"Easier than remembering my tongue-twister of a name, eh?" she offered with a cheerful grin as she bobbed a curtsy. "Been with these scamps for years and years, eh?"

"Mrs. Mac does for us," announced Rupert solemnly.

"Does?" Felicity repeated, attempting politeness.

Marcia smiled softly. “She takes care of the house.”

“Housekeeper, nanny and cook, eh?” The cheerful woman bobbed another curtsey, which was unfortunate to see, because the wee thing became shorter than Felicity, who was sitting down. “They run me ragged.”

“No, we don’t.” Rupert was reaching for the plate with the piece of chicken Bull offered, then passed it to his sister. “We’re practically self-sufficient. Spartan boys were removed from their parents’ care at the age of seven, and I’m *ten*.”

“Aye,” Bull agreed, “but they were entering the military.”

The short woman snorted—actually snorted—and threw a smirk toward Felicity as if in solidarity. As if Felicity had *any* idea what was going on here.

“Rupert likes to *think* he can get on without me, but I know the truth, eh?”

Felicity found herself bobbing in sympathy with the short woman, which must’ve appeared a nod, because Mrs. Mac grinned hugely and reached into the pocket of her apron. “For instance, how were you planning on serving those potatoes, eh?”

With that, she removed—in the manner of a magician pulling a fluffy white rodent from his hat—a huge serving spoon from her pocket. Felicity squinted, certain the pocket was no more than six inches deep, but that spoon was much longer.

With a flourish, the housekeeper presented the spoon to Rupert, who took it with a chagrined, “Thank you,” and began to scoop out potatoes.

“See?” Mrs. Mac said to Felicity, who panicked for a moment before realizing she wasn’t obligated to respond. “Normally, we’d all eat together in the kitchen, but Marcia said she wanted tonight to be special, eh? I had to show her how to iron that pink concoction she’s wearing, eh?”

“I did it mostly by myself!” Marcia announced proudly. “Although I resent that ironing and laundry is seen as women’s work.”

Wide-eyed, Felicity nodded, uncertain how to reply to such an announcement. “Eh?”

It slipped out.

Oh dear.

Mrs. Mac’s unfortunate vocal tic appeared to have rubbed off on her.

“Well now, enjoy yourselves, my loves!” Mrs. Mac bobbed again, not quite a curtsy, not quite a bow. “I’m off to enjoy a bit of peace and quiet for a change, eh? I figure I deserve it, eh?”

As she bustled out, Bull ladled some potatoes on Felicity’s plate. “She’s sort of their grandmother, sort of their nanny,” he murmured under his breath.

Taking her cue from him, Felicity leaned closer, raised her brow, and whispered, “And the *eh*?”

Her son winked. “Says it’ll go over big in Canada, whatever that means.”

It was nonsense, but it made about as much sense as the spoon in the apron pocket. Felicity opened her mouth to ask another question, but was interrupted by a now-familiar voice growling from the doorway behind her.

“I cannae afford the army of servants ye have next door. Mrs. Mac is enough for us.” Mr. Calderbank stomped into the room, finishing his tie. “I want a breast.”

Felicity’s heart began to thud against her rib cage. Good heavens. He’d put on a jacket and knotted his necktie, which made him appear more civilized...but she couldn’t forget the sight of those muscled, scarred forearms.

She wasn’t the only one staring after such an announcement.

The newcomer frowned, then yanked back his chair to sit. “Of chicken.” When they continued to stare, his frown became a scowl. “*I want a breast of chicken.* Since ye’ve taken my duty, lad, just cut me what I want.”

Bull grinned and finished sawing at the poor fowl. “White meat, coming up, Gruff.”

“Dinnae call me that,” he growled, yanking the plate from the lad.

Felicity stifled a laugh into her wine glass.

“Father, you’re being a curmudgeon,” Rupert announced blithely, his focus on serving himself potatoes.

His father snorted. “I fail to see how that’s relevant. After all, I brush my teeth daily.”

It was possible he was vague on the exact definition of “curmudgeon”.

Across the table Marcia had leaned forward, her eyes bright, apparently ignoring her sire’s attitude. “Miss Montrose, thank you so much for joining us.”

Perhaps it was her son’s habit of creating unsuitable nicknames that had Felicity smiling. “Thank you for inviting us. And please do call me Felicity. We’re neighbors, after all.”

Blast. From the look of surprise which flashed across the girl’s face before she tried to hide it by focusing on her chicken, that had been the wrong thing to say. It *shouldn’t* have been wrong, considering the informal way Bull treated their host, but somehow her offer had surprised Marcia.

This was why Felicity didn’t entertain, and rarely went to Society functions. She’d never understood what was acceptable or wasn’t, and always managed to somehow put her foot in her mouth.

Which should be difficult, especially with all of these petticoats, but yet somehow I manage to get the shoe off and the blasted thing—

It was possible she was belaboring the metaphor.

She needed to try to cover her *faux pas*. “Of course, if you are not comfortable with calling me by my—”

“Call her Flick,” her son interrupted. When she turned to him, he grinned first at her, then Marcia and Rupert. “It’s

easier to say than *Miss Montrose*, and isn't as forward as calling her by her first name."

Her *teenaged son* knew more about social expectations than she did?

"Flick..." murmured Rupert, as if tasting the word.

His sister was nodding. "Flick," she said shyly, peeking through her lashes at Felicity. "I like it."

Well, hell, Felicity couldn't scold Bull for using the nickname *now*, could she?

"Bull." The word was barked—there was no other word for it—from the head of the table, where Mr. Calderbank was sawing at his chicken. "What kind of name is that?"

Feeling affronted for her son, Felicity spoke up. "I named him James."

"After my father," Bull added cheerfully, twirling the fork around his fingers in that never-still way of his. "But every third male at Exingham was named James—and they kept dying—so when Flick dropped me off there, my sister Honoria called me Bull to avoid confusion."

Marcia must have known the story, because she grinned. "Because he was so good at lying."

"That's no' an admirable trait," growled Mr. Calderbank.

Again, Felicity bristled, wanting to defend the lad she hadn't really raised, but...she agreed with the man. Botheration.

Her son, however, shrugged. "I dinnae lie any longer."

"Ye dinnae?"

Bull squirmed in his seat and exchanged a glance with Marcia. "No' *much*."

Their host now pierced the lad with a glare. "Ye swear?"

It was too much to hope Bull would let that pass. "Every damn day."

Stifling a groan, Felicity almost missed the reluctant snort Mr. Calderbank released. Was...was that a laugh?

She focused on peas. Peas seemed safer, at that moment, than thinking about Mr. Calderbank laughing.

Picturing him laughing at a joke would make him too likable, and that would be problematic. Easier if he continued to be a grump.

She'd always been partial to a bit of silver at the temples—it was one of the reasons her parents had offered her to the Duke, after all—but on Mr. Calderbank, the effect was disconcerting. The lines at the corners of his eyes told her he was a bit older than her thirty-two years, but there was nothing *old* or *soft* about the man.

From lowered lashes, she peeked at his confident movements as he stabbed a piece of meat. There were scars on the backs of his hands, so many they seemed to be made of nothing but scars. Why would a clerk have hands scarred in such a way?

No, he was nothing like the Duke of Exingham, despite the flecks of silver in his beard. He was strong and hard—

He is a bit of an arse, let us be honest.

Right. Right, she couldn't afford to *like* him, no matter how handsome he was, no matter how he made her insides hum and her inner thighs squeeze together.

You really do need to find your copy of A Harlot's Guide, hmm?

“Exingham,” Mr. Calderbank suddenly stated.

That was it. Just the name of the place where Bull had been raised, away from her.

She wasn't the only one who stared at him, waiting for clarification.

“Do you...want some, Papa?” Marcia asked cautiously.

He paused, fork lifted halfway to his mouth. “What?”

Apparently his daughter was as confused as the rest of them. “Eggs and ham? Did you want—”

“*Exingham*,” Mr. Calderbank repeated, although there was a hint of a smile around the corners of his lips, which Felicity did her best not to notice. “It’s an estate in Aberdeenshire.”

A ducal estate. Felicity didn’t want to have this conversation—not here, not ever—so she hurried to steer the conversation in a different direction. “I was born near Aberdeen, as was Bull.”

Rupert cocked his head. “You don’t sound Scottish. Father is Scottish, *he* was born in the Highlands.”

“My mother was insistent I do my best to sound like a proper English lady, so I had to work hard to lose my brogue.” It was a difficult memory.

“Our great-grandfather was a baron,” Marcia proudly declared, “from the clan MacKinney.”

Pleased to be speaking of something besides Exingham, Felicity inclined her head. “You must be very—excuse me, *verra* proud.” When Marcia smiled at her teasing, Felicity felt her shoulders relax a bit. “The MacKinneys are in the northwest of Scotland, as I recall. Have you ever visited that area of the country?”

The lass was shaking her head. “We’ve only ever been here and New York. Papa says it isn’t safe—” She glanced at her father, pressing her lips shut.

That was the second time there’d been reference to danger in this house. Maybe there was a reason Mr. Calderbank insisted on barring the secret door, besides being a grump?

The smile she offered Marcia was a bit strained. “It is a beautiful area. I traveled there once as a girl, to try to capture the evening light on the mountains.” Well, actually, her parents had dragged her there for an entirely different reason, but she’d brought along one of her first cameras...

“Flick is a genius when it comes to light and film,” Bull offered with a languid sort of wave as he reached for the small glass of wine Felicity certainly never allowed him at *her*

dining table.. “She’s been developing her own prototypes for ages.”

Both children across the table perked up.

“You take *photographs*?” Rupert asked, at the same time Marcia blurted, “Tell us!”

Felicity opened her mouth to respond, but then slowly closed it, confusion and worry stealing over her.

For years, she’d been told not to speak about her life’s passion—“awkward little hobby”, as her mother called it. Once she’d left Aberdeenshire and settled into her own household in London, she continued to follow this social rule. Oh, her daily correspondence was *filled* with discussions about new technologies and chemical compounds and the study of film... But the few times she was in social settings, she’d learned no one *actually* cared about her work.

Hopelessly, she glanced at Bull, as if he could help her.

Perhaps he could. Her son clearly understood more about Society and social situations than she herself did. He sent her a soft smile.

“It’s fine, Flick. They do genuinely want to hear. Marcia’s seen yer laboratory, but I havenae explained much.”

Well...if Bull thought it would be acceptable...

Felicity shot a glance down the table, to where Mr. Calderbank was sawing furiously at his chicken and seemed to be ignoring them all.

“Um... I *do* take photographs. I own quite a few cameras.”

Her son huffed as he replaced his glass. “That’s putting it mildly. No’ only does she own them, she *builds* most of them. Tell them about the moving pictures, Flick!”

Marcia and Rupert really *were* interested, judging from how they seemed to be hanging on every word.

It took a while to open up, but by the end of the meal, Felicity had explained the theories and techniques behind moving pictures, and how she and several other scientists were

working diligently to make these kinds of cameras commonplace.

“You mean they exist?” Marcia gasped. “You *have* one?”

“Yes, of course. It is my own design, and it is terribly bulky, but one person can carry it with the leather strap. Mr. Le Prince is slightly ahead of me—and I do not trust that Edison fellow—but I think, between those of us who correspond, every day we push the boundaries of what is capable.”

She couldn't help it; she *knew* she was flushed with excitement as she explained the advancements she'd helped achieve. She was leaning forward in her chair, gesturing with her fork—a horrible *faux pas* she was lucky Mother wasn't alive to see—talking about her passion.

And when she glanced at the head of the table, it was to see Mr. Calderbank finished with his meal, sitting back in his chair, watching her over the top of his wine glass.

There was an *interest* in his eyes, a heat, which caused her stomach to tighten. Not in a, *Oh God I have to attend a ball and dance with an earl* sort of way. More like a, *He knows how to make you scream in pleasure* sort of way.

Did he?

Did he know how to do that?

Suddenly breathless, Felicity sat back—hard—in her chair.

These feelings—these *reactions* she'd been having to Mr. Calderbank, ever since he'd pinned her against the wall and threatened her... She swallowed. She'd never felt these sorts of things before.

Oh, she knew what they meant, but somehow, her fingers and her battered copy of *A Harlot's Guide* just weren't sufficient any longer.

She needed someone to explain—to *teach* her—how to handle these delicious, terrifying sensations.

“Can we play parlor games, Papa?”

The conversation had continued around Felicity who'd been completely preoccupied, but Marcia's question cut through her distraction. She glanced around to realize not only were her dining companions all finished eating, but Rupert had begun to collect the plates and silverware, in a matter-of-fact manner which made her suspect this was commonplace.

She suddenly felt awkward and entitled, to realize—despite her less than idyllic childhood—she'd never had to manage with fewer than a half dozen servants, all of them extremely loyal.

Oh dear, she was wool-gathering again. At some point, Mr. Calderbank had given his permission to decamp to the parlor, and Bull was reaching to help her from her chair.

Parlor games? Good heavens, when was the last time she'd played parlor games? Well, she'd played some a few months ago with Bull, but those hardly counted, did they? It was just to try to learn his personality better, really, and they'd been difficult.

Not because *he* was difficult, but it's bloody impossible to play Blind Man's Bluff with only two people. Even with great mental effort applied to the problem.

“Charades!” Marcia announced triumphantly as Bull led Felicity into a sparsely furnished sitting room. “Rupert, you write out the words, since I know you won't play.”

“A verb is an action word, or a word describing a state of being,” the boy intoned solemnly, pulling a pad of paper from inside his jacket. “There are thought to be over sixty thousand verbs in the English language, but only sixteen are used with regularity. I'll endeavor to choose others.” He began tearing slips of paper.

Good heavens, he *permanently carried* a notebook? Presumably in case he had any flashes of brilliance while away from his desk.

Remembering the times she'd be struck by an idea while dining, or strolling through the park, Felicity decided the lad

had the right idea, and wondered if any of her gowns had pockets big enough for a notebook of that size.

Perhaps Marcia was on to something with her pocket crusade.

Bull led her to a settee and settled beside her. Rupert was busy scribbling, and her son sent Marcia a grin.

“Perhaps we should choose non-verbs next time. Last month Rupert handed me ‘*to be*’ and it took Marcia all afternoon to guess that one.”

The girl rolled her eyes. “That’s because it was a stupid word.”

“Or perhaps,” her brother murmured without looking up, “Bull is just bad at being.”

“Better than good at being bad,” Bull shot back.

From the back of the room, where he’d settled in a chair beside the window, Mr. Calderbank snorted.

Another laugh? Felicity twisted in her seat.

When he saw her looking at him, Mr. Calderbank raised a brow in challenge. She said nothing, of course, so his lips twitched and he lifted a copy of today’s *Daily Constitutional* between them.

Hiding, hmm? So he wouldn’t have to participate in the charades?

“I’ll go first,” Marcia declared, reaching for one of the folded slips of paper her brother held in his hands. When she unfolded it, she frowned thoughtfully.

She stood, moved in front of the fireplace, and held one arm out, to her side and in front of her, curved around...an imaginary round thing. Then she lifted her other hand, made a fist, and began to make small circles in the air right above the imaginary round thing.

Bull sat up straighter, his fingers tapping out rhythms on his thighs. “You’re churning butter? Plunging a toilet?”

“Plunging can’t be used in that context,” huffed Rupert. “Toilets aren’t built that way these days.”

Marcia rolled her eyes and increased the speed of the small circles.

“Holding your little brother’s neck and grinding his crown!” Bull declared triumphantly.

“What?” Rupert shook his head, just as his sister blew out a frustrated sigh. “What’s—”

“Here, I’ll show you!” announced Bull with a wide grin, lunging for the lad.

Felicity just managed to grab him. “Stop being silly. Charades is not a silly game.”

“Did you hear what you just said, Flick?”

She grimaced, but didn’t loosen her hold on her son’s arm. “Yes, I realized as I was saying it. But really, pay attention.” Marcia had opened her fist, and now used the finger of that hand to encircle the imaginary round thing, then pretended to lick it. “She’s obviously baking a cake. Or...something?”

The girl smiled and nodded, then made a fist again and started making the small circles.

Bull hummed. “You’re...stirring batter? Making bread? I don’t know, I’ve never cooked before. Batter? Battered?” When Marcia shook her head enthusiastically, he continued. “You’re verbing something in a bowl? Stir, blend, whisk?”

“Mix!” Felicity declared triumphantly. “You are mixing!”

Marcia dropped her imaginary bowl with a huge sigh. “*Finally*. How hard is ‘mix’, Bull, honestly?”

Bull shrugged and dropped back against the settee, linking his hands behind his head as if he had no cares in the world. “You should’ve just pointed to yourself, and told me to remove an *n*. I would’ve guessed *minx*.”

Felicity was surprised to discover she was enjoying herself. “Who is next?”

“You, Flick,” her son declared with a smile. “But since Marcia will likely kick me if I don’t give her a chance to humiliate me, I’d better take your turn.”

Without giving her time to react, her son had popped up and was leaning over Rupert’s hands. He read the slip of paper, then shook his head and pierced the lad with a glare.

“You have a devious mind, Rupert.”

“Thank you,” the lad said solemnly.

With a sigh, Bull stepped in front of them, shook out his hands, then launched into a complicated pantomime involving theatrical reactions to *something* he saw in the distance, then apparently jumping sideways, pressing his back against...a wall? And then peering around the corner?

“You’re frightened of something?” Marcia called. “Is it a bear? A lion? A policeman looking for pickpockets? A razor?”

Bull, who Felicity knew for a fact was quite proud of the wispy mustache he was trying to grow, broke character long enough to plant his hands on his hips and glare at his best friend. “Oh, *ha-ha*.”

“No talking,” called Felicity, trying to hide her amusement. “Go back to the hiding.”

Her son slipped back into his pantomime, seeming intent on whatever it was he was hiding from.

“Concealing yourself?” Felicity called, at the same time Marcia guessed, “Evading someone? Something? Some kind of verb!”

Rupert, who of course couldn’t guess since he’d written out the words, had by this point dissolved into snickers as Bull’s antics became more and more outrageous.

Then, to everyone’s surprise, a deep voice from the back of the room called out, “Avoiding. Ye’re avoiding someone.”

Bull stopped, mid-pantomime, his hands held over his head and one foot off the ground—why, Felicity couldn’t guess—and started at Mr. Calderbank in shock. “That’s right. Avoid. Ye guessed it, Gruff.”

The man grunted and snapped his newspaper up once more. “Dinnae call me that,” he grumbled from behind it.

Bull exchanged a glance with Marcia, and his lips slowly curled. “Yer turn, Flick,” he declared as he threw himself back to the settee. “Pick a good one for her, Rupert.”

Felicity stood and smoothed down her skirt, more to settle her nerves than anything else. It had been a while since she’d played charades, yes, but this was a friendly game with the children, nothing to be worried about.

Right.

But when she went to choose a slip of paper—there were only three left—Rupert’s hand jerked sideways, and her fingers closed around the paper which was laying off to one side. When she peered suspiciously at him, the lad’s expression was curiously blank.

Well, if he wanted her to have that one, she wouldn’t argue. She straightened and unfolded the paper.

Dance.

Well...*blast*. How did one dance by oneself? To be fair, she barely knew how to dance with a partner, but...

She made an effort.

Trying to remember the one flamenco performance she’d seen, Felicity lifted her arms, swayed her hips, clapped her hands, and stomped her feet. It didn’t work.

“Ye’re making wine? Stomping grapes?”

“Having a fit? What’s she doing with her hips?”

“Och, the hands are the issue. She’s slapping mosquitos!”

“I think she’s standing on hot coals!”

“Lift yer skirt, Flick, so we can see what yer feet are doing. She *is* stamping something. *Is* it hot coals? Potatoes?”

“Why would she be stamping potatoes?”

“I dinnae ken, her personal life is her own.”

“Really, Bull, what kind of hobby is *stamping potatoes*? And why would she keep it secret?”

“Look at the way she’s flailing! Perhaps it *is* mosquitos?”

“Yes! Bugs! Is it bugs? You’re being bitten by something?”

Marcia and Bull were having the time of their lives, yelling increasingly ridiculous suggestions as Rupert laughed and Felicity felt her cheeks heat in embarrassment.

Finally, she dropped her hands to her hips and glared at the pair. She couldn’t think of any other dance which a woman could perform by herself, and clearly her flamenco left rather a lot to be desired.

Every other dance she could remember required a partner. “I need a man.”

I need a man.

Well, blast, she hadn’t intended to say it like *that*.

The declaration rang through the room, and her eyes swung to the chair by the window, where Griffin Calderbank had lowered his paper and apparently been watching her performance this entire time.

I need a man.

You know, I rather think you do need a man. And you know exactly who you want.

Bull cleared his throat. “I’m no’ helping ye, Flick. I’m one of the guessers.”

Her gaze flashed to Rupert, who was now sitting up straight, his eyes wide. “I can’t help you. I wrote the clues.”

“All the better to help me,” she challenged, “since you know what I’m trying to do.”

The lad swung in his chair. “Father? Miss Flick needs you.”

Mr. Calderbank hadn’t dropped his eyes from her. Felicity was almost afraid to look at him again, but when she did, it

was to find him slowly folding the paper. He held her gaze as he set it aside and pushed himself to his feet. “Well, if she needs me...”

Then he was in front of her, and she was taking a deep breath, trying to hold onto his scent of shaving soap and the wine they’d had at dinner.

“What do ye need?” he asked mildly, and her stomach flipped over.

Her stomach, and *lower*. She had to squeeze her thighs together.

Need. She needed him.

But here was an opportunity she hadn’t expected, so Felicity leaned forward, pushing herself on her toes to breathe into his ear. “*Dance with me, please.*”

When she stood back, he was studying her impassively. Then he nodded. No words, just a nod. An agreement? It wasn’t “*anything you want*” but he hadn’t turned her down either.

One arm went to her waist, the other rose, and she placed her hand in it, and then he was dancing with her.

There was no music. There was no *space*, and they mostly spun between the cold hearth and the battered tea table, but they were *dancing*.

Together.

Felicity had apparently forgotten how to breathe.

She stared up at him, his lips so close to hers, his arms so strong around her, and was grateful she didn’t have to remember the steps of the dance. Or the calculation of angle of incidence of a light ray. Or her own name.

Because for a moment, a moment of *now*, all that existed in the world was the sensation of this man’s arms around her, her hand safe in his strong, scarred one.

And the knowledge that, as their pelvises came into contact with one another, he was as aroused as she was.

Ask him. The tiny voice in the back of her head was becoming a clamor. *Ask him to kiss you. Ask him to teach you.*

She was curious—oh so curious—and this man could assuage her curiosity. It was for science.

He slowed them to a stop, his gaze never once leaving hers, then stepped back. When his hand fell from her waist, Felicity felt herself swaying forward, trying to hold onto him.

He gave no sign of recognition, nor of wanting the same thing.

From the settee came a low guess. “Ye’re dancing.”

Felicity had to swallow to clear her throat. Still gazing up at Mr. Calderbank, she nodded. “Aye, dancing.”

She wanted more than dancing. She wanted *more*.

How to ask for such a thing?

CHAPTER 4

IT MIGHT'VE surprised Mr. Steele—or hell, anyone who knew Griffin—to know he was currently stretched out on the thread-bare rug in the front parlor of his townhouse, his chin in his hands, listening to his son complain about his latest design.

“It lacks *speed*, Father!” Rupert sat cross-legged with the miniature boat in his lap. No, it was little more than a body with a mast, hardly a boat. “The hulls are stable enough, but it won't win any races.”

Griffin managed a one-shoulder shrug from his position, and reached over to tap the starboard hull. “This is the problem, lad, I suspect. *Three* hulls seem superfluous.”

They sat amid chaos; Rupert's sketches, glue and wood and small dowels and other detritus of their crafting attempts, three books open to schematic designs of watercraft, and one open to a page about aerodynamics of fish bodies, although of course it's not *aerodynamics* when one speaks of underwater creatures. Apparently. Griffin would be damned before he'd admit he didn't know the real term.

This morning's jaunt to the pond in the park had proven a disaster, so Rupert had returned home in a tear to rebuild the thing. Griffin, for his part, had merely held on and gone along for the ride.

Sometimes it was galling to know his son was smarter than he was.

He couldn't be prouder.

“*Two* hulls work fine for outrigger canoes—”

Griffin interrupted him. “The outrigger is there to support the main hull.” He rolled over onto his back and tipped his head back to keep his son in his sights. “The third hull isn’t an outrigger, it’s a third hull.”

When Rupert frowned in concentration, he looked so much like a younger Griffin it was at times scary. “Then I need to reconfigure the proportions. The secondary hulls need to be...”

He trailed off, muttering to himself, then pushed the model from his lap and lunged for one of the engineering books, flipping through it with a mission.

Griffin relaxed his muscles, his gaze resting on the molding along the ceiling, and allowed himself a small smile, knowing it was hidden behind his beard.

Aye, Rupert was a bloody genius, and his father was proud of him. It amazed Griffin how his children, once they’d understood their letters and basic arithmetic, had found their passions so easily. Marcia was far more interested in the modern world and social causes than Shakespeare, but Rupert studied *everything*.

He deserves more of yer time than one afternoon a week.

Both of his children deserved so much more. More than he could give them.

Marcia deserved the chance to travel, to see more of the world. To understand this life she’d been born into wasn’t the only way of life. The opportunity to *choose* how to spend her passions and which causes to support, rather than being limited by her father’s lack of savings.

And Rupert...Rupert deserved tutors, and a real library, and university. Perhaps ship-design wasn’t in his future—three hulls, indeed!—but the lad was learning the basic tenet of engineering, which was to fail and fail again until one understood the process. Only *then* could success be achieved.

Aye, Rupert might never be hired to build ships, but so long as Griffin had breath left in his body, his son would never have to make a living with his fists.

Absent-mindedly, Griffin stretched both hands above his head, then reached toward the ceiling. The pull of muscles, tight from sitting in a hard chair all week, was a relief. His fingers curled into a fist, then relaxed again, and he took a deep breath as he studied his knuckles.

Aye, these hands had done terrible things, but last night...

Last night, he'd held Miss Felicity Montrose as delicately as any flower, when in reality he'd wanted to crush her against him. Wanted to hold her, protect her. Wanted to grind his cock against her soft belly, feel her open to him.

Wanted to kiss her.

Right here in this room, with their children watching. He'd wanted to kiss her, feel her melt against him, hear her breathing catch, watch her nostrils flare and her eyes darken with desire.

He'd wanted to *fook* her.

More than he'd wanted to fook any woman since—nay, *ever*.

Mary had been the kind of wife a vicar's son married; nonsense, a good cook, and knew how to stretch a shilling. She'd been pretty enough, and Marcia looked enough like her Griffin was sometimes disconcerted. But whereas Mary would've never encouraged her daughter to do something as scandalous as protest corsets, and insisted the girl learned sensible, useful skills like laundry and cookery, Griffin had let the girl follow her dreams.

Now that he thought about it, perhaps he'd done it to spite Mary's memory.

She'd been a good wife—a little overbearing, but only because she'd thought she'd known best—and hadn't deserved the death she'd received.

And when Blackrose had mentioned poison, Griffin had known he had to protect his children.

Perhaps years of hiding, of tamping down urges and trying to maintain a low profile, hadn't been great for his

concupiscence.

Perhaps *that's* why he was now lusting after his strange next-door neighbor.

“Knock-knock!” came the cheerful call as Mrs. Mac bustled in with a small tea tray.

Rupert didn't look up. “You're supposed to knock, Mrs. Mac, not *say* ‘knock-knock.’”

“My hands were full, eh?” She winked at Griffin, who rolled himself to his feet. “Tea, Rupert?”

Griffin was already anticipating a taste of the woman's scones, and halted his forward momentum to frown at her. “Why *Rupert*? None for me?”

“Now, don't pout, Mr. C. You'll get your tea, eh?” She was trying to decide where to set the tray. “There's an invite for you in my right pocket.”

Griffin raised a brow. “I've learned no' to reach into yer apron, Mrs. Mac.”

“Once I found a lizard in there,” Rupert offered as he carefully marked his place in the book with a piece of balsa wood. “Also, a lampshade.”

“Had to put it somewhere, eh?” Still, the housekeeper plunked down the tray and reached into her right pocket.

First to emerge was a long fork, of the tuning variety. She stared at it for a long moment, then shook her head, muttering, “*Never seen that before,*” and stuck it under her arm. Next her hand emerged with small creamer jug—full of milk—which caused her face to alight as she arranged it carefully on the tray.

“I *knew* I'd put that down somewhere sensible, eh? Not what I was looking for, but I always say you find what you were looking for in the last place you look.”

“Aye, Mrs. Mac.” Griffin clasped his hands behind his back and rocked back on his heels. “That's why it's the last place ye look for it.”

“Right, now where is it...” Her plump face screwed intently as she delved into The Pocket Of Horrors, reaching past her elbow into a square of fabric no more than six inches on a side...and flinched. “Ow! The little imp is irritated, eh, now I took his milk—Oh! Here it is.”

She pulled out an envelope, which she flourished. “This invitation arrived an hour ago. You’re going to tea next door.”

Griffin grew dangerously still. “I am, am I?”

His housekeeper rolled her eyes. “I read it, eh? Can’t blame me for being concerned. Tea, next door with Miss Montrose, ten minutes.”

Cheeks bulging with scone—lucky lad—Rupert mumbled, “Better get changed, Father.”

Before she could scold the boy for his poor manners, Griffin distracted Mrs. Mac by pulling the letter from her hands.

It was indeed an invitation. For today—*now*, practically. He felt his heartbeat speed up, which was a strange reaction to a situation which wasn’t at all dangerous.

No’ dangerous? Ye forget what it felt like to hold her?

Perhaps it *was* dangerous, to have tea with a woman like that. “What does she want?” he muttered, staring down at the neat, precise script which seemed to fit an inventor like Miss Montrose.

“Perhaps she means to board up the secret door,” Mrs. Mac said kindly. When he looked up at her, she offered a shrug and a smile. “You’ve been yelling at the lass for months, Mr. C. Perhaps she’s finally paying attention.”

Yelling? He’d been yelling at her?

Ye held a knife to her throat.

Well, aye, but it’d been dark and *she* likely didn’t know that. He’d thought she was a thief. He’d thought she’d been there to harm his family.

The invitation crumpled in his fist. *Which was why the damned door needed to be sealed, so no one could sneak in from behind.*

“Perhaps she’s finally seen reason,” he muttered. Aye, he’d join her for tea, and hopefully board up the door. Tea and joinery.

After the invitation he hadn’t meant to extend last evening—the one his children and Bull and Mrs. Mac had clearly conspired on—he was owed an invitation of his own. And hopefully he’d get the answer he’d been looking for.

“Oh! No guest should arrive empty-handed, eh?” Mrs. Mac plunged back into her apron pocket. “Well, that’s not true, plenty of people do it. But I think Miss Montrose would appreciate...”

She pulled out a cat.

From her pocket.

A relatively small, orange and white, hissing *feline*.

Griffin instinctively took a step back.

“Here you go, Mr. C,” she announced cheerfully, thrusting the animal toward him. “The wee demon must’ve snuck through the secret door from her house, eh? I found him in the kitchen, looking for cream. She’ll like him back, eh?”

“I’m allergic to cats,” he blurted.

“No, you’re not.” Mrs. Mac stepped closer, waving the poor thing in front of her. “Just grab him by the scruff of his neck like—good, eh? Everyone knows that’s how you hold a cat. You figured it out, eh? Now, I’ve got to go finish proofing the bread dough.”

She turned to go, leaving a stunned Griffin holding a *cat*. A cat who clearly didn’t know about the universally acknowledged way to hold a cat, judging from how much it was twisting and spitting to escape his grip.

At the door, his housekeeper turned. “And you can’t go to tea at a posh lady’s house looking like that, eh? I brushed down your gray suit and laid it out in your room.”

Without taking his eyes from the spitting feline, Griffin growled, “I’m holding a miniature weapon of mass destruction, Mrs. Mac. Surely ye dinnae intend me to put it down and go change?”

“Good point, eh? I’ll never catch the beastie again. Best go over just the way ye are.”

He was *certain* Rupert was smirking when he called out, “Good luck, Father,” over his teacup.

And that was how Griffin found himself on the front steps of his next-door neighbor’s home, holding a cat at arm’s length.

When the door opened, the butler—silver-haired, stately, and judgmental—didn’t bat an eye at the feline. The way he looked Griffin up and down spoke volumes of his opinion, regardless of the presence of cats.

“Good afternoon, *sir*. You are expected.”

Holy shite, the man sounded like the last gasp of a zombie. When he moved, Griffin could swear he heard creaking. But as the butler turned away from the door to shuffle toward a small sitting room, he managed to sound more aloof than a chimney sweep on the roof of the fifth floor.

Perhaps ye should’ve changed suits, after all.

But when the butler pushed open the door to the sitting room and intoned, “Mr. Calderbank, Miss Montrose,” he swore he saw her face light with excitement as she ceased stroking the fat gray cat at her side. And damn it, if something in his chest didn’t give an answering squeeze.

Perhaps ye’re having a heart attack.

His subconscious wasn’t being helpful.

She’d risen to her feet, leaving her own feline to stretch lazily on the settee, but was now eyeing the hissing cat he held by the scruff of the neck.

Feeling out of his element—what the fook *was* his element, anyhow?—he thrust the thing toward her. “Here.”

She hesitantly stepped closer. “You...brought me a pussy—a cat, Mr. Calderbank?”

“Nay, I’m returning one of yer beasts. Mrs. Mac found the wee monster in her kitchens. *This* is why ye need to board up the door, Miss Montrose!”

Ignoring his outburst, she stopped in front of him and scooped the angry cat out of his hand. He released it with a sigh of relief.

“This wee *monster* is not one of mine, Mr. Calderbank.” She tickled the cat’s stomach—which, miraculously didn’t end in her losing any fingers—and the damned thing settled right down. “And since we have reached the point in our relationship where you are bringing me votive offerings in the form of kittens, I think perhaps you can call me Felicity.”

She was blushing. She was blushing, and meeting his eyes, and in her arms, the ill-tempered feline had curled up and begun to growl.

Nay, not *growl*. The other noise, the one that sounded like a growl but meant—a purr! That was it, the damned thing was *purring*.

“So I stole a cat?”

“Not if you found it in your kitchen.” Her smile seemed hesitant. “If he found his way into Mrs. Mac’s kitchen, he is likely a stray. You might have a new pet.”

His attention was on her lips, and the shape they made when she said *pet*. There wasn’t a bloody thing sensual about the word *pet*. So why was his cock stirring?

“I dinnae want the thing,” Griffin growled.

She didn’t seem fazed when the cat clawed its way out of her arms and up to her shoulder. “Then I will keep him. What should I name him?”

Why in the hell was he still staring at her lips? “I dinnae care, Miss Montrose.”

“Felicity, please,” she corrected softly.

His gaze snapped to her eyes, and his scowl softened. “*Flick*, I think yer son calls ye?”

That blush was climbing her cheeks again, almost as red as the single curl which fell across her forehead, and behind her spectacles her eyes had widened. But she didn’t look away, even as she raised a hand to readjust the kitten perched beside her ear. “It...is a sobriquet I do not mind from him. Or your children.”

What about me?

At some point, he’d taken a step closer to her. Her *and* the cat. “*Flick*,” he whispered.

She swallowed. “And...Mr. Calderbank?”

“*Griffin*,” he gruffly corrected. “Since I’m bringing ye cats.” *Kittens*.

Pussy.

“*Griffin*,” she repeated, and her lips curled into a soft smile. “I...would you like tea?”

He suddenly wasn’t very hungry. “That’s why ye invited me, is it no’?”

Suddenly, she looked away furtively, and the shock of losing her attention made his hands fist. She turned toward the tea service already arranged. “I invited you to tea, *Griffin*, because I wanted to discuss something with you.”

He grabbed her before she could leave him, and when his hand closed around her forearm, he felt that strange warmth—the same he’d felt last night—climb his limb.

The cat decided that was an opportunity to leap from her shoulder to his. *Griffin* reacted predictably, with much cursing and flailing about, while the wee beast scampered up and over his head, then landed atop his opposite shoulder.

He managed not to drop his hold on *Felicity*’s arm.

She was smirking as she reached to coax the animal back to her shoulder, like some kind of piratical accessory. The damned thing certainly liked to be up high.

His scowl was caught by the light of laughter behind her spectacles, which slowly faded the longer he stared at her. And aye, he felt guilty about that, but he couldn't seem to make himself stop. Any more than he could cease the way his thumb *needed* to make small caresses against her forearm.

She just felt so damned *right*.

Her tongue darted from between her lips, the sight arousing enough to make him swallow his groan. Was his gawking making her uncomfortable?

"Griffin?" she whispered.

"The secret door?" he blurted. They'd been discussing why she'd invited him. Yes. Concentrate. Words. "Ye're ready to block it up?"

"If that is what it takes."

She was holding her breath again, as she had during their dance.

"*What* takes? Why do ye need me?"

That hesitant smile again. "To help me name my new kitten?"

"Monster." He released her, but frowned to keep her in place. "If no' to discuss the door, why'd ye invite me?" *Felicity*.

"I..." Her chin rose, and she met his eyes. "I am a scientist, Mr.—*Griffin*. When I am faced with something strange, something I do not understand...I try to understand it."

Fair enough. The curl lying against the corner of her spectacles was distracting. Or perhaps it was the serious expression in her eyes.

"Aye, I can understand that. Rupert is the same way."

"Perhaps he inherited it from you."

Her soft statement caused Griffin's chest to tighten. "Nay," he rasped. "No' me." He just wanted to keep his family safe,

and he was the sort of man to use his fists and blades to make it happen.

Unbidden, his hand rose, his fingers brushing against her skin as he brushed aside the curl. “Why am I here, Flick?”

“I need you.” The whisper shot straight to his cock. “I do not understand this—this *this* between us.” In her arms, the cat’s purring seemed suddenly loud as Griffin tried to remember how to inhale. “This spark of electricity, this *light*, this...” She shook her head, breaking their connection. “This *flash*. It is unnatural, and I have never before experienced its like.”

Her words tumbled atop one another, forming a pyramid of meaning he couldn’t comprehend. Everything around them had faded to a muted sort of gray, and for a moment, the entire universe was staring up at him.

She wanted him.

She wanted him, and God Almighty, he wanted her.

But all Griffin could manage was a harsh growl as his fingertips dragged down her cheek to her jaw. “Ye have a son.”

As if she needed a reminder.

She was no stranger to intimacy, is that what he meant? What *she* meant. Was she...asking him for a liaison? Sure as shite sounded like it.

Unable to help himself, his touch dragged to her throat. Under his fingertips, her pulse fluttered.

“I want to experiment, Griffin,” she whispered. “With you. I want to understand this...these feelings.”

“What feelings?” He hadn’t meant to ask, but she didn’t flinch from his bark.

When she swallowed, he felt it. “Being around you... You make me warm—no, *hot*. I throb. I yearn.”

“I’m a simple man, Flick. Speak plainly.”

“I’m *trying*.”

His lips twitched. “Nay, ye’re using metaphors. Ye sound like one of those naughty penny dreadfuls the lads used to pass around at school. *Yearn, throb*. Next ye’ll be speaking of yer *core* and *mighty lances* and *moist sheaths* and *pert nipples*.”

Did ye really just mention nipples to a woman who invited ye for tea?

She was holding her breath again, so he assumed she hadn’t minded.

“I have read those books, yes,” she agreed carefully. “You are saying not to use such language?”

“No one likes the word *moist*, Flick.”

Her lips curled into a reluctant smile, and she blew out a breath. “I suspect you are teasing me—”

“Never.” His fingers pressed against the hollow at the base of her throat for a moment. He had no right to touch her so intimately, but couldn’t seem to stop himself.

“I want you, Griffin Calderbank,” she said clearly, meeting his gaze, “to teach me about the pleasures of the flesh.”

Had he thought *pet* was an intriguing word on her lips? *Flesh* went right to his cock, which was indeed throbbing. “Metaphors, Flick,” he growled.

Was that the slightest roll of her eyes? A delicate huff of irritation as she reached up and pulled the kitten to her chest once more? “I want *you* to make love to *me*.”

“Make love?”

Well hell, he *was* teasing her now, wasn’t he? But the other option was actually *thinking* about the offer she’d just made, and frankly, his cock was hard enough as it was. Certainly harder than an invitation to tea should’ve provoked.

To his surprise—why was he surprised by anything this woman did any longer?—she stepped closer. *Closer*. Holding a cat, his fingers pressed against her throat, and she stepped *closer*, until the feline was trapped between them, and her lips were inches from his.

She knew what she wanted, and he admired that. Why wouldn't he?

“Sex, Griffin,” Felicity whispered. “I want you to make me orgasm. I think you can.”

Dear. Christ. Almighty.

Make her orgasm? In that moment, he wanted nothing more. He wanted to fook her in every way, make her scream his name.

But...she was his neighbor. A nuisance in his life. Someone whose stubbornness put his children at risk.

Besides, the cat was objecting to being squished.

So he pressed his fingertips against her skin once more, trying to imprint the sensation of her skin against his in his mind, then pulled his hand away and stepped back. “And what will ye give me in return?”

Behind her spectacles, Felicity's big green eyes blinked. Blinked in confusion, as if she couldn't comprehend the question. It *had* been an arsehole thing to ask.

“Um...pleasure?”

Oh Christ Jesus, *aye*.

This woman *would* give him pleasure, if he let her.

He stared down at her, realizing his hand had come to rest on her forearm. How much trouble would it cause if he were to just...lean down and kiss her? One kiss, here and now? Just to assuage his curiosity, just to *taste* her.

And the cat be damned.

Just one kiss.

And he might've—who the fook knew?—had the door not flown open and two young bodies tumbled over themselves in their haste to enter.

“Mother!” called a breathless Bull.

“Papa!” called an excited Marcia.

“*Fudge*,” murmured an irritated Griffin, even as he stepped away from Felicity and the cat bolted for her shoulder once more.

She shot him a questioning glance as she reached up to calm the animal. “Fudge?”

“*Mother!*” Bull was grinning when he skidded to a stop in front of her, obviously flustered by something to call her something so formal. “We have a visitor.”

“Yes, we do.” She nodded to Griffin. “And he just asked for fudge.”

Marcia, practically bouncing in place, waved dismissively. “He doesn’t want *fudge*, that’s just the word he uses when he thinks we’re listening and he doesn’t want to use a truly naughty word.”

“A truly naughty word like *what?*” Griffin growled. “The whole point was ye’re no’ supposed to ken those other words.”

“Papa.” She planted her hands on her hips, cocked her head, and sighed in irritation. “I’m *fourteen*. I read books.”

Books about *fooking?*

Bull’s hands were never still, even in the best of times, and now he waved them in front of Felicity. “*Hello?* Earth to Flick? We have a *visitor!* He’s verra important, and—is that a new cat? Ye found another stray?”

“Nay,” she said haughtily, stroking the wee ball of orange and white. “He is Mr. Calderbank’s new cat, but I will care for him.”

Marcia had gasped excitedly—presumably at the thought of having a pet. “What’s his name?” she squealed, leaning closer, apparently forgetting about naughty words and whatever the excitement had been.

Griffin shoved his hands in his pockets to keep from reaching for both females, and contented himself with rolling his eyes. “Monster. Fiend.”

“Demon, perhaps?” offered Felicity, with a wry twitch of her lips as she exchanged glances with her son. “I know a

Demon. He turned out quite nice.”

Ironically, so did Griffin. He didn’t know the man *well*—just a fellow agent in Blackrose’s employ—but he was one of the men determined to hunt down the traitor, now, according to Thorne. Strange to think there was a different man out there named Demon.

“Not Demon.” Bull was shaking his head, although his hands were still flapping about. “Devil? Beast?”

Marcia was trying to pet the animal. “I think he looks like a little angel. How about Cherub?”

“How about Parrot?” Felicity offered, lips twitching.

Losing his patience, and thinking how fooking close he’d been to kissing his annoying—*stimulating, arousing, desirable*—neighbor, Griffin cleared his throat. “*Who* is the visitor?”

“Oh!” Bull pulled himself up, clasped his hands in front of him, almost devoutly, and smiled. “The secretary to the Duke of Peasgoode is waiting in the sitting room, Mother. *Flick*. He’s verra important, and we need yer help.”

She blinked, then nodded and hoisted the cat higher still. “Absolutely. What can I do?”

Marcia reached for Griffin’s hand. Surprised, he allowed it to be held, and watched her in concern. “We need your help too, Papa.”

His nod was immediate, but he didn’t say anything. If his child needed him—if *any* child needed him, even if it was the somehow-less-infuriating-than-usual Bull—he’d move mountains.

Bull and Marcia exchanged a glance, then Bull took a deep breath.

“Mother, Mr. Calderbank...” *Oh, he’s being formal now?* “We need ye to pretend to be married.”

CHAPTER 5

“TO EACH *OTHER*?” Griffin blurted, just as Bull turned his optimistic expression Felicity’s way.

Oh dear.

She *wanted* to object. Wanted to tell her son to cease these silly games. But...Bull was gazing at her with so much hope in his beautiful gray eyes—she suddenly remembered they’d been blue when he’d been born, and she *so* wanted him to take after her—that she found herself unable to scold him.

Even if his words *had* caused her heart to jump in excitement for a moment.

“Bull...” She cleared her throat, glad now that Griffin was standing away from her. “What do you mean, *pretend to be married*?”

“Like...” He glanced from one to another, his enthusiasm fading. “Just...pretend to be married. You and Mr. Griffin. And me and Marcia and Rupert pretend to be siblings.”

Well, at least he hadn’t called the man *Gruff*.

Felicity opened her mouth to explain to a sixteen-year-old boy why what he was asking wasn’t *easy*, but couldn’t think of a way to explain. Instead she shut her mouth, then her eyes, and pushed her spectacles out of the way to squeeze the bridge of her nose.

She felt a headache coming on.

Likely caused by irregular blood flow.

What?

Think about it. In the last few minutes, your heart and your nether bits have been competing to see which one could throb the hardest. Between the kitten—good Heavens, any man delivering a kitten could make a woman's heart pitter-patter, even if he did hold it by the scruff—and working up enough bravery to ask him to make love to you, and your children's interruption, and this ridiculous question...no wonder you have a headache.

But...nether bits?

That was what you chose to take away from that last sentence?

Nether bits could be a bit distracting, yes. But she was a *scientist*. Better to call them what they were. Vulva. Labia. Clitoris.

Well those words are considerably less erotic.

Less erotic than nether bits? Good heavens, why was she arguing with herself?

Luckily, the rest of the conversation had moved on without her participation.

“Marcia, what in the f-*fudge* are ye talking about?” Griffin barked. “Why would I pretend to be married to Flick?”

Before either of them could comment on his use of the sobriquet, Felicity pulled the kitten to her chest once more and began to stroke it, the movement likely more to calm herself than the animal. “Yes, perhaps you had best explain, and quickly.”

The two children exchanged another look, and it was very definitely one of excitement.

“A few months back there was a contest in the *Daily Constitutional*,” Bull began, “sponsored by the Duke of Peasgoode.”

“I remember,” barked Griffin. “Load of nonsense.”

“Yes, Papa, but *your* name was listed!”

“That’s how I ken it was nonsense.”

“Excuse me.” Felicity tried to keep her voice and her manner calm. “Can someone please explain to *me*?”

It was Griffin who did, in his usual sharp way. “Peasgoode doesnae have an obvious heir. He published a list of names and said he’d choose one.”

Bull was doing that thing where he snapped his fingers then slammed his fist against his palm in short succession, making a horrible noise. But since it seemed to calm him, she’d never told him how distracting it could be.

Now he was practically vibrating as he hurried to add to the explanation. “In the article, Peasgoode said he’d grant the dukedom—an entire dukedom!—to the man he chose as his heir.”

“Sexist,” murmured Marcia, and Felicity had to agree. “Wasn’t Peasgoode in Scotland? Women could inherit there... “But Papa’s name was listed as one of the possibilities.”

If Felicity’s brows rose any higher, they’d climb into her hairline. “You are related to the duke?”

Griffin scowled at her. “Eighth cousin, six times removed, something like that.”

“Your great-great-grandmother was his great-grandfather’s sister,” Marcia informed him primly. “You’re third cousins, once removed.”

Her father was glaring at her. “And how did ye find that out?”

She shrugged. “We had Rupert research your family tree. He’s good at that sort of thing.”

A reluctantly impressed look came to Griffin’s eyes, and Felicity was a little disconcerted to realize she could so easily read them.

Bull shook out his hands, a sure sign he was holding in too much energy. “The point is, Peasgoode announced he was going to choose an heir from that list, and since he didn’t have a family, he was going to prioritize family men.”

Felicity's head swung from Bull to Griffin and back again. "Griffin *is* a family man."

"Right, but he's not married," Marcia announced.

Was it her imagination, or did Griffin tug his daughter a little closer? "I can be a family man without being married," he growled.

Bull was nodding. "Aye, of course, but we figured ye had a better chance of being chosen if we wrote to the duke and sort of *fudged* the truth a little."

"*Bull*," the man barked.

"Aye, bull, *exactly*." Her son seemed so cheerful to admit to lying. "And it worked! Ye're one of the finalists! The duke sent his secretary to meet ye—meet *us*. All we have to do is pretend that we're one big happy family, and ye can be a *duke*."

Griffin was shaking his head. "I dinnae *want* to be a duke."

There were unsaid words there, Felicity knew. She couldn't yet guess what they were, but the inquisitive side of her could hear them.

"Papa..." Marcia's quiet words drew his gaze, her expression pleading. "If Peasgoode chooses you for his heir, that means *Rupert* would one day be a duke." Her father's eyes widened slightly and his nostrils flared as he sucked in a breath, and she continued on without pausing. "He would have access to the best schools and the best tutors, and I could study whatever I wanted without anyone telling me I was too poor or too educated or too *female*, and you could..."

She trailed off, but judging from Griffin's tortured expression, she'd made her point.

"And ye wouldnae have to move, Griffin," Bull said quietly.

When the man's gaze swung to him, the lad flinched, then shrugged. "Marcia told me how tight money is, how ye're going to run out before the end of the quarter and make them all move."

Now Griffin turned to glare at his daughter, who merely threw her arms around his middle. “I don’t want to have to move, Papa.”

Felicity’s own heart gave a lurch when the man closed his eyes and wrapped his arms around his daughter.

“I dinnae want to move either,” he admitted gruffly. “But I’m *no’ a duke*.”

Bull shrugged. “Ye could be.”

Deciding it was time to steer the conversation back on track, Felicity cleared her throat. There were still several unanswered questions—one of them more pressing than the others. “But Bull, why is His Grace’s secretary *here*? Neither of us are related to Peasgoode. Why is it *me* to whom Griffin must pretend to be married? How are you involved in this?”

Her son glanced at Marcia, whose face was buried in her father’s shoulder, and blew out a breath. “I read the article, and showed it to Marcia. I didnae want them to have to move, and I wanted...”

When he trailed off, she stepped closer.

After all these months, she still wasn’t certain exactly how to act around this untamed son of hers. She’d had him for so short of time before giving him up, and he’d run wild for years before his older half-sister, Lady Honoria, had tried to civilize him. But he had a fierce sense of ethics which, unfortunately, had little to do with legalities. And he was loyal.

Oh, so loyal.

“Bull,” Felicity began, but didn’t know how to finish. Instead, she merely reached out and offered her hand.

To her relief, he took it. This tall, lithe, more-elegant-than-her lad took her hand and squeezed it as if she might mean as much to him as he meant to her.

“What do you want, Bull?” she whispered.

He swallowed. “I miss Scotland.” It was said almost sheepishly, combined with a shrug. “I was just thinking that if

Griffin *did* become a duke's heir, then Marcia would have to move, aye, but perhaps we could...visit them. Go home."

Home.

Oh.

Oh, dear.

She squeezed her son's hand as tears came to her eyes and the kitten in her arms tried to climb up her shoulder. She told herself the tears were likely because of the small sharp claws.

Bull had been raised in Aberdeenshire, born at her parents' home, then moved to Exingham on his father's decree. When his brother Rourke had become the Duke and Honoria had married the heir to Clan MacLeod, he'd followed the happy couple to Skye.

Peasgoode was in the Highlands.

Home.

All these months, as Bull tried to fit in here at her home in London...had he really been missing his home? The Highlands? Had he been *lonely*? Is that why he'd sought out Marcia, why he'd been causing so much mischief?

Bull's smile was a little lopsided. "Besides, Flick, imagine the doors which would open for ye if ye were seen on the arm of the Peasgoode heir, aye? Everyone would be clamoring to hear about yer latest invention!"

While she didn't believe she needed the accompaniment of a man to make her research valid, she had to admit the Peasgoode name *would* open doors. Even if this whole charade had been started by a secret door which refused to stay shut.

But really, all other considerations paled in comparison to making her son happy.

"How hard can it be?" Felicity finally said. "Just pretending to be married? For an evening, I presume?" As Bull's expression lit up, she heard Griffin grunt, so she turned to him with a brow raised in challenge. "One evening, Mr. Calderbank?"

“And ye’re willing to pretend to be *Mrs. Calderbank*?” he growled, as if probing at the idea, looking for weakness. “We *all* have to pretend to be a family?”

“Aye,” Bull immediately agreed. “Ye and Marcia and Rupert are a fine family, and when we wrote out the letter, we kened that. But Rupert did all the research for us, and most of the men on that list are married with bushels of children. We thought...” He shrugged unapologetically. “Well, we figured if ye had a wife and an extra bairn, it wouldnae hurt.”

“Ye. Ye’re supposed to be my bairn?”

Bull grinned. “Step-son. So I can call ye Griffin.”

“Ye can call me *Father* or *Sir*.”

The lad wouldn’t be Bull if he let that pass, so he popped to attention and snapped off a crisp salute. “Aye, *Sir*!”

Griffin ignored the provocation, proving he was better suited to be Bull’s parent than Felicity might’ve expected.

Marcia leaned back to look into her father’s face. “Does this mean you’ll do it, Papa?”

“One night?” the man grumbled. “Dinner?”

“I’ve invited him to stay with us, Flick,” Bull hurried to explain. “Dinner tonight, and I asked What’s-his-face to have the gold room made up.”

“Again, the butler’s name is Spude,” murmured Felicity, certain the stodgy old man—who’d been with her for a decade and was loyal, if fussy—had curled his nose at being ordered by a cheeky lad. He was almost certainly listening at the door right now. “But yes, of course he can stay.”

“And us?” growled Griffin, meeting her eyes. “Where will we stay?”

Oh dear.

“It’s just one night, Papa,” Marcia assured him. “Rupert will stay with Bull—as long as the secretary doesn’t go into the chamber, he won’t know there’s only one bed. And I’m going to stay in the pink room, or at least pretend that’s my

room.” Her nose wrinkled. “It’s all pink frills, but there’s so much *light*, and *eight pillows* on the bed!”

Griffin was staring down at his daughter, his expression unreadable. But Felicity, who was beginning to guess how he thought, wondered if she saw regret in his blue eyes. She’d never known Marcia longed for a well-appointed chamber... and she doubted he had, either.

This seemed like a simple enough request. One night.

One night of make-believe.

“Marcia and I wrote him together,” Bull said quietly. “Rupert helped, too. He’s verra good at researching. We...told the duke what we thought was relevant about the family.”

“The *pretend* family,” Griffin correctly, still staring at his daughter.

“Right, the *pretend* family. The *happy* family.” Bull cleared his throat. “We embellished at bit, but since the entire thing is an embellishment, we figured it wouldnae be too bad. All we have to do is fetch Rupert and pretend to be a family. The Calderbanks.”

Marcia squeezed her father. “I *know* we can convince him, Papa.”

Over her head, Griffin met Felicity’s eyes.

She couldn’t read them, but was that just the slightest twitch of a brow? Was he...asking her thoughts?

For some reason, the realization made her flush with pleasure. The Grump Next Door...his *trust* brought her pleasure?

Vowing to explore the implications at a later time, and ignoring the way her heart was slamming against her ribs, she raised her chin. “It could be fun.”

And this time, she didn’t mistake the slight curl of Griffin’s lips. “Fine. One night of lies, I suppose we can manage that.”

Whatever response she could have made would have been drowned out by Bull's whoop and Marcia's squeal of excitement. The two of them lunged for one another, grabbing hands and jumping about in a circle, in an entirely childish manner.

It made her smile.

Or perhaps she was smiling because *Griffin* was smiling almost reluctantly as he watched them cavort.

Felicity straightened her shoulders and tried to arrange her expression into one of ladylike hospitality. That's when the Wee Fiend dug his claws into her collarbone.

"Ow!" she muttered, trying to pry him off.

Suddenly, Griffin was beside her. "Do ye need help?"

It seemed as if each time she removed one paw, another set of claws would find purchase. "No, it's just that your—ow. He has decided he doesn't want to be set down."

She could see the slightest smirk in Griffin's eyes as he glanced toward the settee, where Miss Pretty-paws had been quietly lounging. "Ye have a cat infestation, Flick."

Well, she *did* rather, didn't she? With a sigh, Felicity nudged the kitten higher on her shoulder, until the determined little devil made himself comfortable sitting like a parrot. "I suppose I should allow him his fun. He will get tired and run off soon enough."

He was examining her expression. "Will he?" Griffin murmured, and she wondered what *he* saw.

So she plastered on a smile and tossed back the curl that refused to stay in her bun, and swept toward the door. "Come along, children, bring your father. We have lies to tell."

CHAPTER 6

HE'D HAD dinner with her the evening before; the night before that he'd held her at knifepoint; an hour ago she'd propositioned him. But watching her chat with the secretary of the Duke of Peasgoode, it became clear that Griffin really didn't know a bloody thing about Felicity Montrose.

Last night she'd clearly been out of her element, but once Bull had steered the conversation toward her photography, she'd lit up like one of her damned flashes. She was a woman who knew what she wanted, and went after it.

This afternoon in the parlor had proven it.

Fook him sideways, would he have kissed her, had their children not burst in on them? He'd *wanted* to—God knows he did.

She wanted it. What harm would it have caused?

At that moment, it might've caused plenty of harm. But it had quickly been eclipsed by the harm *this* particular charade could cause.

Griffin toyed with the stem of his wine glass and watched the woman across the table—ostensibly his wife—make polite, if awkward, conversation with a man who held the power over the Calderbanks' future.

While a cat perched atop her shoulder.

This fine setting was most obviously her home, while he felt gauche and out of place. She might find social situations awkward—even he, who barely knew her, could see how

nervous she was right now—but she held herself as a lady would. Poised, proper, polite.

And ye pinned her to a wall and ground yer cock against her?

Someone like him shouldn't *touch* a lady like her.

She asked ye to make love to her.

The thought of his scarred hands on her skin—on her breast!—caused his cock to twitch and he had to shift uncomfortably.

To distract himself, he took a sip of his wine. It didn't help. Here in this fine dining room, with the perfect soup and the silent footmen waiting to serve the next course and the elegant drapes, he felt like a bull in a china shop. Out of place, out of touch.

A duke is surrounded by elegance.

He didn't want to be a duke.

Liar.

He'd *known* he was descended from the dukes of Peasgoode, of course he did. But it was so many generations ago, and through his grandmother's line, that it had never been relevant. His father had taken a living far away from his family, so Griffin had never known any cousins. Da had been a gentleman, though just barely, so Griffin had attended school with other gentlemen.

But instead of using his head for numbers to make a living for his wife and children, Griffin had gone into Her Majesty's service, and protected England's interests with his fists.

At least, he *thought* he had.

He glanced down at the hand holding the stem of the wineglass, the scars standing out vividly. Could a man like him become a fooking *duke*?

Ye could, if it meant the opportunities Marcia and Rupert deserve.

Right. *Right*. They were the reason he was doing this.

So why was Felicity doing this?

When she turned toward him and caught his eye, she sent him a small smile. The kind of smile a wife might send her husband, aye, but they weren't married. Either she was brilliant at subterfuge, or...

Why was she doing this?

For ye, ye dobber.

Nay, not for him. For Bull. Griffin had heard what the lad had said about Scotland...surely that's why Felicity was going along with this mad scheme?

Luckily, she was better at carrying a conversation than he was, which allowed him to sit and scowl with his thoughts as he occasionally passed tidbits under the table to what turned out to be—rather than the large slobbering dogs he'd thought had menaced his ballocks—an extremely rotund feline. It had sunk its claws into his thigh and any attempt to shake it off resulted in more pain, so he kept slipping it morsels of bread until it finally grew bored—or perhaps full—and slunk away.

He vowed to check his trousers for blood at a later point.

The dinner was spent in polite discussion of the weather, the terrain of the Highlands, and Bull's remarkable sense of style. The lad looked like a peacock, but Griffin could admit he was a remarkably well-turned-out peacock.

The secretary—an older man, tall and thin, with a kind smile—seemed to enjoy speaking to the children the most. Griffin hadn't expected that, but he supposed it was unusual to allow bairns at formal dinners, so perhaps they were an anomaly.

Felicity hadn't hesitated to include them—include them *all*—but just pretend this was completely normal.

Perhaps it *was*, in her mind.

She'd swept up to the secretary with that cat on her shoulder, shaken his hand a little too enthusiastically, and introduced the children as her own. Bull had grinned hugely, Marcia had given a surprisingly pretty curtsy, and Rupert...

Well, Rupert, upon being introduced to “Mr. Armstrong, secretary to the Duke of Peasgoode”, had cocked his head to one side and said, “That is a silly name. *To pee* is a verb, where *good* is modifying it as an adverb. Therefore his title should be *Peaswelle*. I’m certain he’ll want to petition the Queen to change it.”

Mr. Armstrong had been a bit dazed, and Griffin hadn’t bothered to hide his groan of embarrassment.

But the older man seemed charmed, for some reason, and now gestured with his fork toward Felicity’s new pet. “I cannot help but noticing, madam, your unusual ornamentation.”

She grinned and lifted one hand to stroke the kitten’s tail. “Would you believe I had almost forgotten about him? He is a new pet, one Griffin just brought home, and he apparently is quite stubborn.” The smile she sent Griffin was one acknowledging inside secrets, and while he tried to return it, his stomach clenched. “I was rather hoping if I ignored him, the wee creature would get bored and leave on his own.”

“I’m not certain it’s working,” Mr. Armstrong said with a smirk. “What’s his name?”

Griffin muttered, “Monster,” as Felicity hurried to explain, “We have not decided upon one. Do you have a suggestion?”

The older man eyed the cat. “Polly, perhaps?”

Bull, he of the never-still-fingers, was twirling a spoon across the back of his knuckles in a thoroughly improper way no one seemed to care about. “Polly is good. Mother’s cats all have funny names. Nyan, Longcat, Cheeseburg, Miss Prettypaws...”

“*You* named Miss Prettypaws, Bull,” she was quick to point out.

“Aye,” he drawled, flipping the spoon and catching it. “But I was barely three years old at the time.”

Marcia nodded. “She’s ancient. The cat, I mean.”

The duke's secretary was grinning. "Animal rescue must be a family pastime. As I recall from your letter, Miss Marcia, you also rescued your first family pet...but I don't recall the specifics. What was it, again?"

"It was an octopus," Rupert supplied dryly. "She *rescued* it from a tide pool where it was living its best life."

"Really?" Mr. Armstrong asked in surprise.

"Oh yes, that's not something I'm likely to forget."

Christ, their lies had truly become ridiculous.

Mr. Armstrong was nodding. "You invested in an aquarium for him, as I recall from your letter. What was his name?"

"Larry," blurted Bull, at the same moment Marcia exclaimed, "Rudolph!"

They looked at one another, wide eyed, and Bull said, "I meant Rudolph," right as Marcia shook her head and burst out, "Larry."

Rupert looked from one to the other, then calmly said, "His name was Lawrence Rudolph MacSnorkle Buskirk Calderbank, Esquire, the Third. But we all called him Snorky."

"He's gone now," Felicity hurried to offer, then added under her breath, "thank Heavens."

In unison, Bull and Marcia crossed themselves, bowed their heads, and intoned, "*Requiescat in pace, Snorky*," solemnly.

Griffin gaped.

There was a moment of silence—shocked, on the part of Griffin and Felicity, and respectful from Mr. Armstrong—then Mr. Armstrong cleared his throat. "The Third? Snorky...the Third?"

"Yes." Rupert didn't hesitate. "He was named after our great-grandfather."

Griffin choked on his excellently prepared lamb.

Before he could take a sip of wine, Marcia had jumped to her feet and was behind him. He lifted his hand to indicate he wasn't actually dying, contrary to appearances, but she gave his back a mighty whack anyhow.

Despite it, he managed to swallow what was in his mouth and wash it down with some wine. His throat was bruised when he shook his head and muttered, "*Snorky.*"

Griffin's father's father had been John Calderbank, and his mother's father had been an Oliphant. He'd never heard of a *McSnorkle*.

"Are you aright, Papa?" Marcia asked from behind him.

Griffin waved his hand, trying to refrain from growling. They named the imaginary octopus after his father?

Nay, they named him after yer imaginary grandfather. Dinnae get confused.

Too late.

Mr. Armstrong toasted Marcia as she slid back into her seat. "Bravo, my dear!" As the lass preened, the older man continued with a proud smile. "Of course, I suppose you owe your father, after he saved your life, correct?"

Griffin saw his daughter freeze and shoot a frantic look across the table to Bull—could she not remember their lies? She swallowed, then guessed, "Yes?" When Bull nodded, she exhaled in relief. "Yes, Papa saved my life. When I was... drowning?" Bull nodded again. "Drowning, yes. In a river."

Oh for fook's sake.

"And he jumped in to save you?" Armstrong shook his head. "Just remarkable, especially considering your letter claimed he didn't know how to swim. Of course, I would expect nothing less from a man who once fought off two bandits with a broken arm. I mean, he *had* a broken arm while he fought them off, not that he picked up an arm which had been broken, and used it to fight off—oh dear, I lost my thought. What was I...? He was a brave man, I think was my point."

Griffin fixed his gaze on the drapes across the room. It was the only way he could keep from growling.

The fact that Felicity looked to be one twitch away from laughter didn't help, either.

"And dinnae forget the time he saved Rupert's life, eh?" prompted Bull with a smirk.

"Yes," the lad intoned seriously. "Were it not for my father's swift action with a penknife, two chickens, and that rubber hose, I might never have walked again."

"Just remarkable," repeated the secretary in a murmur. Then he shook his head once more and sat back in his chair. "I have to say, I think your family is *quite* remarkable. The Duke and I were intrigued by the level of detail your children included in the letter. Not just bragging about you, yourself, Mr. Calderbank—may I call you Griffin?" Without waiting for an answer, he continued. "Most of our applications were full of men praising themselves and touting the qualities they felt a future duke would need."

Marcia hurried to say, "All of which Papa has, of course."

Lies.

"Of course," the secretary said with an indulging smile. "But so few of the letters actually included information and details about the *family*, which is of course what we were most interested to read about. Your letter highlighted a family where each member was free to be themselves, and you all value one another and your time together."

By now, Griffin was squirming in his seat, uncomfortable as hell.

"So few of the applicants even mentioned their children," Armstrong continued. "Whereas here *you* are, taking your family to the shore each summer!"

His words echoed in the sudden silence.

Felicity pressed her lips together, clearly trying not to laugh, and Griffin had to shut his eyes, so as not to see her.

Because he had no idea what *he* would do if she began to laugh, but he didn't want to find out.

Bull deadpanned, "Which is even more remarkable considering he doesn't know how to swim."

Laughter.

That was the unfamiliar, unfortunate feeling bubbling in Griffin's chest. If Felicity laughed, *he* was going to laugh, and then the ruse would be over.

When was the last time he'd laughed? When was the last time he'd *let* himself laugh?

Armstrong seemed delighted. "A father who puts aside his own preferences for the sake of his children's leisure! How delightful. What beach was it you said you visited?"

"Torbay," blurted Marcia, at the same time Bull said, "Brighton," and Felicity offered, "Whitstable."

The three of them looked wide-eyed at each other, then changed their answers.

"Brighton."

"Whitstable, I'd forgotten."

"Torbay!"

Without looking up from his peas—hopefully they were *good*, and not *well*—Rupert clarified. "We visited Brighton last year, and Devon the year before. Mother wants to visit Whitstable next."

Felicity looked relieved. "Yes, of course. Thank you for remembering, dear."

Good God, when had his youngest become so adept at fibbing? Perhaps Rupert had been spending too much time with Bull.

Strangely this realization threatened, even more, Griffin's control. He couldn't tell why, exactly, his chest was burning, but he didn't like it. Anger? Laughter? Helplessness? Irritation?

Why'd ye agree to this ruse in the first place?

Well, it was nearly over.

Mr. Armstrong seemed completely duped. And utterly enthralled.

“I have to admit, Mr. Calderbank, that when your *children* wrote the letter to the duke, we were both quite intrigued.”

Since he was being directly addressed, Griffin supposed he had to answer. He cleared his throat. “Aye, well...”

“My husband did not quite know their plan, Mr. Armstrong,” interrupted Felicity demurely.

Griffin was ashamed to realize he'd breathed a sigh of relief at her help.

The older man offered a fond smile. “Please, Mrs. Calderbank, call me Ian.”

“Then you must call me Felicity—*Flick*. Everyone else does.” Did she roll her eyes just slightly? “But I must confess a secret, since I do not expect Griffin to.”

She leaned forward in her seat, and the motion appeared to be the limit of what Monster-Fiend-Demon-Hellspawn could take, because the wee gray kitten gave a *rmalwp* and jumped to the table.

Unfortunately, he landed in the cranberry sauce.

As Felicity gasped, Bull reacted with lightening reflexes, scooping up the crystal goblet, but not before the cat tracked blood-red cranberry across the white linen.

As the angry little feline jumped to the ground and darted between the footman's legs, who chased the beast from the room, Felicity began to laugh.

She sat back in her chair, holding her stomach, and Bull joined her in chuckling. Soon Marcia and Armstrong had joined in, and even Griffin felt his lips twitching.

“I suppose we ought to get the tablecloth soaking,” said Marcia, a bit worriedly. “Mrs. Mac showed me how to get fruit stains out.”

The secretary looked as if he were having a grand time. “Mrs. Mac?”

Felicity hurried to answer. “Mrs. Mac—MacSquash, next door. She...helps with the children’s...education.”

MacSquash?

“How interesting!” The older man turned to Rupert. “Is that who you were visiting when I arrived? Your sister said she had to fetch you from next door prior to dinner.”

Rupert’s expression was carefully blank as he glanced at Marcia, then back to the secretary. “Yes. I was...with Mrs. Mac. We were...working...on a thing.”

Interesting. He’d been quick with a lie minutes before, but now the lad seemed to be stuck for ideas. Griffin resisted the urge to roll his eyes, and vowed to have a talk with his son about the merits of honesty.

“A thing. How delightful!” Ian turned back to Felicity. “Now, what were you saying about a secret?” He wagged a finger around the table. “There’ll be no secrets from the Duke, I would hope!”

No’ bloody likely.

The whole damned thing was a secret.

Felicity, however, seemed to be settling into the lie remarkably well. She could’ve been in Blackrose’s employ, so easily did she come up with fibs. With a smile, she collected herself. “Oh, yes, the secret. Well, I will tell you, since my husband will not confess. You see, until this evening, neither of us had any idea these scamps wrote you that letter.”

The secretary’s brows rose, and his gaze slipped between Bull and Marcia. “*Really?* As I said, we *did* think it unusual that Griffin’s children applied to us. But it never occurred to us that you might not be aware of it, sir!”

Since the whole bloody table was looking at him now—minus Rupert, who was once more shoveling his peas onto his knife, using the cranberry sauce as an adhesive—Griffin tried to look appreciative, and not just ill. “I confess I didnae think

the newspaper announcement was anything more than a hoax. I suppose these *scamps* took it upon themselves to learn if it was true.”

“Oh, it is very much true, I can assure you!” Ian’s gaze landed on each of them in turn. “Unusual, perhaps, but the Duke is an unusual man. I’m looking forward to introducing you to him,” he announced with an anticipatory grin.

Griffin caught Bull’s eye, and was surprised to see him looking concerned. The lad hadn’t expected this?

And Felicity, for the first time, seemed uncertain. “Is the Duke...coming here?”

“Oh no, His Grace is in poor health, as the announcement stated, and doesn’t travel, which is why he entrusted me to interview the favorite applicants in his stead. I have been tasked with interviewing the likeliest candidates, and I can tell you, of those I’ve met and visited with, most have fallen short. *None* of them have the familial qualities the Duke is looking for in a heir. I know he’ll enjoy meeting you very much.”

Griffin realized his hands were fisted on his knees, but he couldn’t make himself relax. “And how...how will he do that, if he isnae coming to London?”

Ian looked surprised. “Why, when you come to Peasgoode!” He glanced around the table. “Didn’t you read the fine print? The next step is for you and your family to become the Duke’s guests at Peasgoode for a month.” Before Griffin could respond to that preposterous idea, the man quipped, “Assuming, that is, your job can release you for that amount of time.”

Griffin was already shaking his head. Leave London? *Travel?* Put his children’s safety at risk?

Absolutely not.

Felicity answered for him. “Griffin is quite important at the accounting office. I doubt they would release him.”

But the secretary was jovial. “Oh, I wasn’t speaking of the offices of Cooke, Books & Steele, Mrs. Calderbank.” He

tapped the side of his nose and winked. “I meant your husband’s work as a spy!”

Griffin had *heard* the phrase “blood ran cold”, but until that moment he’d never actually experienced it.

He couldn’t breathe. His heart was hammering in his chest, but he could feel himself going light-headed.

Felicity, of course, thought it just another lie to reconcile. “Oh, goodness,” she tittered. “Those days are behind Griffin!”

How did Armstrong know?

Griffin’s gaze landed on Bull, across the table. The lad was looking uncharacteristically guilty, and just like that, Griffin’s lungs expanded in a desperate gasp.

It was part of Bull’s lies.

“I think, Ian,” he began slowly, holding the lad’s gaze, “I need to speak to my family. Alone.”

The secretary tutted. “Come now, you’ve all just been handed the chance of a prize! Surely you can discuss details later?”

“*Now,*” Griffin reiterated, pushing back from the table and standing. “*Alone.*”

When he turned and stalked out, he was gratified to hear the sounds of his family following him.

All of them.

CHAPTER 7

FELICITY'S MOTHER had raised her to never hurry. *Hurrying is for servants, dear*. She was supposed to move at a sedate and stately pace.

But honestly, how was that supposed to accomplish anything? Besides, the way Griffin was all but running, she *had* to hurry to catch up.

She scooped up her skirts in one hand and held the other hand out to Rupert, encouraging him to hasten, as well.

Griffin stopped at the sitting room, then glanced back at the dining room where Mr. Armstrong waited. She could read his thoughts; this wouldn't be far enough away.

Oh dear. Was he planning on yelling?

She glanced at Bull, who was already heading toward her study. She wouldn't blame Griffin for yelling, if that's what he did. Bull and Marcia had gone far beyond "cheeky" in their attempts to impress the Duke of Peasgoode with their lies.

A spy? Of course, Felicity could guess why Bull had chosen that particular lie, but it didn't make it *better*. Or was Griffin's anger based on the fact they were now expected to travel all the way to Scotland, after Bull had promised the lies would only be for one night?

Impossible.

She'd only just perfected her camera's shutter problem; there was no way she could leave it now.

Bull was gesturing at them to join him in the study, and when Felicity glanced down at the lad holding her hand, Rupert's little mouth was pulled into a frown. They followed Griffin, who stalked into her study, paused to glance around at her apparatuses, then took a deep breath and headed—unerringly—for the secret door built into the paneling.

“If I open this, how many cats will run through?”

Was that a joke? Griffin Calderbank did *not* make jokes. Felicity glanced around. “Neither Nyan nor Cheeseburg are in here, so as long as we close it directly behind us...”

He yanked it opened, then stood there as they each climbed through the door into the empty room on his side of the wall.

Felicity, Bull, Marcia and Rupert stood about awkwardly as he pulled the door closed, then brushed past them, heading out of the dark room. Felicity exchanged a glance with Marcia, who had gone beyond *worried* and into *scared*.

Oh dear.

In her hold, Rupert's small hand had gone clammy. Were they scared of their father? Griffin wouldn't hurt them, surely they knew that? Well. Felicity raised her chin and gathered her skirts once more. It was up to *her* to stand in front of their father's anger.

They followed him into his own study—bare except for a desk, chair, and an overflowing bookshelf—where he stood facing the window, which overlooked the evening street outside. Even from here she could see the tension in his shoulders, and the way those magnificent hands flexed and unflexed at his sides, as if he was imagining strangling someone.

Bull took a step toward him, and before Felicity could point out that now *wasn't* the time to get cocky, her son ventured, “Gruff?”

“Ye little shite,” the man growled, without turning around. “Of all the lies...God *damn*. Why that one?”

“Ye being a spy?” Bull swallowed and exchanged a glance with Marcia. “Because it sounded better than *meek accounting*

clerk.”

“*Damnation!*” In an alarming blur of motion, Griffin’s palms slammed into the window frame. Startled, Felicity pulled Rupert against her.

As he dropped his head and breathed deeply, Griffin’s growl was so low she barely heard it. “Being a meek accounting clerk has kept my family safe all these years.”

Marcia grabbed Bull’s arm. When he turned to her, she shook her head, and he frowned.

What were those two up to?

The silence stretched, and Felicity’s pulse seemed unnaturally loud in her ears. Was she supposed to say something? Diffuse the situation?

And then to make matters worse, there came, from downstairs, a knock on the door.

When Rupert turned—almost gratefully—to leave the room, presumably to answer the door, his sister stopped him. “You know Papa’s rule; no one answers the door but him!”

Griffin had already raised his head and was looking out the window. He sighed. “Thorne’s carriage. Of course. Just what I need.” He shook his head, and Felicity could *feel* his frustration. “Aye, Rupert, go let him in. I need to speak to yer sister and bro—damn, I mean, Bull.”

Felicity reluctantly released Rupert and wrapped her arms around her middle. Bull was too old to cuddle, so why did she feel the need to reach for *someone*?

“Bull?” Griffin’s growl was low, dangerous.

Before her son could speak, Marcia stepped in front of him. “Papa, we’re sorry. We didn’t know that we would be required to visit Scotland. We know you wouldn’t have agreed to that.”

Griffin was still staring out the window, his hands braced against the frame. “This has gone too far. Too many lies.”

“We know, Papa. We *know* you’re not a spy, honest, but Bull’s right, it *did* sound more exciting, and we just wanted the Duke to choose you...”

She trailed off, and her father...well, Griffin’s shoulders were encased in simple wool, the jacket he’d been wearing when he’d accepted her invitation to tea-and-scandalous-propositions. But even so, she could see them slump, *see* his exhale as he dropped his head down between his shoulders.

“*Holy shite,*” muttered Bull, his eyes wide. “It’s no’ a lie, is it?”

Felicity swung to him. “What?”

Her son was still staring at Griffin. “It’s *no’ a lie*. Gruff *is* a spy, are ye no’?”

Without raising his head, Griffin mumbled, “I dinnae ken what ye’re talking about.”

“Thorne visits ye weekly.” Bull turned on her, his hands twitching, thumbs touching each finger alternately, a sure sign of his agitation. “He *says* he’s just stopping by to check on me, to report to Rourke, but Marcia says he *also* visits the Calderbanks.”

Marcia was nodding. “That’s right. Papa said Viscount Thornebury is an old friend.”

“Aye, an old friend from Blackrose’s service!”

At the lad’s triumphant announcement, Griffin swung up and about and ended facing them with his fists raised. “*What?*” He paused, breathing heavily, and Felicity doubted he was aware of how defensive he looked.

“Good heavens,” she whispered, eyes wide. “You *are* a spy!”

His thunderous glare turned on her, but she was too shocked to watch her words. “It makes sense! Your concern about your family’s safety, your scars, the fact that Thorne visits...you worked for Blackrose, did you not?”

He took a step toward her, his fists still raised. “How in the *f-fudge* do you ken that name, milady?”

Surprisingly, Felicity wasn't afraid. Yes, he radiated anger, but beneath that anger, beneath the barely controlled *power*... there was fear in his blue eyes. Instinctively she stepped forward, but then Bull was beside her.

"Gruff, my name is Bull Lindsay."

Griffin didn't take his gaze from her. "Aye?"

"*Lindsay*, as in the Lindsays of Exingham."

Lindsay, as in *Rourke Lindsay, the current Duke of Exingham, Blackrose's Blade*.

But Bull didn't say that part. He didn't need to; Felicity knew enough from her friend Georgia, who'd married one of Blackrose's agents.

Griffin's eyes had widened. His fists uncurled, but only far enough to allow him to drag his hands through his hair. "*Shite*," he muttered as he turned away. "Ye ken Rourke Lindsay? His history? Ye're—what? His cousin?"

Instead of explaining that Rourke was Bull's half-brother, Felicity raised a brow in Marcia's direction. "Is *shite* an acceptable word to use in your presence, but fu—*other* words are not?"

The lass shrugged. "I don't always understand Papa's linguistic rules."

The menfolk ignored them.

"Rourke's old partners were Thorne and Demon Hayle, the new Duke of Lickwick," Bull offered. "I ken all about their investigation."

Felicity nodded, although Griffin had braced his hands against the desk and wasn't looking at them. "And I am close with Demon's wife."

Granted, she hadn't seen Georgia since she'd married the reclusive Lickwick and retired to Aberdeenshire, but that hadn't stopped them from writing to one another.

"Wait..." Marcia was standing with her hands on her hips, her head cocked to one side. "You're saying Papa *is* a spy? I

thought when we wrote that, Bull, it was a joke!”

“It was a shite joke,” rasped Griffin.

Felicity made a mental note about *shite* and *fudge*.

You know, it would likely be for the best if you just were very, very careful with your language around Marcia—and especially Rupert. You would not want to anger Griffin by introducing new words to their vocabulary.

The girl rested her hand against her father’s back. “Papa?”

Griffin made a noise, as if he’d started to say something... then ceased.

Felicity decided it was up to her to explain. “Marcia, dear... Your father was a spy.”

“A...hero?”

Oh dear. “In a way.” And in another, more accurate way... *Not.* “William Blackrose had a cadre of men who worked for him, collecting information on Britain’s enemies, financial transactions, that sort of thing.”

“Assassinations,” Bull added grimly. “Nasty business, hurting people to get the information they needed.” Despite the weight braced on them, Griffin’s scarred hands curled into fists on the desk as Bull continued. “Information Blackrose said was vital to protecting state secrets and serving Her Majesty.”

“But it was a *lie*,” Griffin rasped, his eyes closed and his head hanging down. “All a lie.”

“I don’t understand.” Marcia’s hand was now dragging up and down his spine, trying to comfort him. And strangely, Felicity ached to do the same. Instead she squeezed her middle harder.

Griffin’s eyes flashed open, but even from here, Felicity could tell he wasn’t really seeing what was in front of him.

“Blackrose lied to us, lied to us *all*,” snarled the man. “He wasnae working for the government. He was working for *himself*. And we were doing his dirty work for him.”

He turned then. Turned and met Felicity's gaze, and the bitterness, the *pain* in his eyes was enough to make her gasp out loud.

"We're no' heroes." He shook his head. "We were *fools*."

"No," she whispered.

"*Aye*. Fools, and damned men as well."

Marcia was nodding. "*Damned* is fine to use in front of me, but not Rupert?"

"No' helping, Marsh," quipped Bull, but he winked at his friend.

Felicity could no longer stand aside.

She stepped forward, reaching for Griffin. He was facing her now, and when she stopped in front of him, he didn't pull away. Instead, when she placed her hands on his forearms, reveling in the warmth of them, he seemed to lean into the comfort she offered.

No, surely that was all in her imagination.

"*Griffin*," she whispered, "I have spoken to Georgia about her husband's investigation. I have heard Bull's stories. I doubt Rourke realizes how much he really knows—Bull is *good* at finding things out when he is not supposed to. But if half of what he has learned is true..."

She trailed off, shaking her head. And Griffin's piercing blue gaze watched her hungrily.

"What?" he finally rasped.

Her hands slid down to take his. "You are not a fool, just because you were fooled."

"That's the definition of a fool."

"No." How to explain? "Blackrose was an evil man, yes, but I know Exingham and Thorne and even Lickwick—although he rarely leaves his estate—are working together to bring him down. He might have escaped justice, but he cannot run forever. And now that I know Thorne has been visiting you, I have to assume you have been part of the hunt."

Under her hands, his muscles tightened. “Nay.” He sounded in pain. “Nay, I’m no’ hunting him. I’m *hiding* from him.” He glanced at Marcia. “I cannae allow him to hurt my family.”

But when his gaze dragged back to hers, Felicity saw the anger in his eyes for what it really was, and she gasped. “You are not part of the hunt...but you *wish* you could be.”

“Nay!” His denial was immediate. “I cannae allow Blackrose to hurt anyone else I love.”

Anyone else?

She squeezed his hands. “What better way then, Griffin, than to be part of the hunt for him?”

Behind her, Bull cleared his throat. “We’re about to have visitors.”

Sure enough, there were footfalls in the corridor—a man’s, not Rupert’s—and moments later the door burst open, revealing Viscount Thornebury.

The man was a friend of Rourke’s—Bull’s older brother, the Duke of Exingham. He’d been the one to bring the lad to her when she worked up the nerve to write to the Duke. He also was friendly with her dear friend Georgia’s new husband, Demon.

Well, Thorne was the kind of man who was *friendly* with everyone. He was handsome and suave and always seemed to be smiling, although more than once she’d had a hint that under his graceful exterior lived a dangerous man.

For instance, he wasn’t smiling now.

His gaze landed on Felicity and Griffin’s linked hands, and she resisted the urge to pull away. She wasn’t doing anything wrong.

Was she?

“Griffin,” Thorne barked, then nodded to Bull and Marcia. “And Miss Montrose. Just the person I wanted to see.”

“M-Me?” Felicity stuttered.

“Aye. Why in the *hell*—excuse my language—is the bloody carriage of the bloody secretary of the bloody Duke of Peasgoode parked in front of yer bloody townhouse?”

GRIFFIN PULLED his hands from Felicity’s grip, feeling guilty and somehow defiant at being caught holding her. “How do ye ken who he is?”

“Nay, I asked ye a question.” Thorne wagged his finger. “Ye answer first, then I’ll answer.”

So Felicity did. “Mr. Ian Armstrong is my—*our* guest for the evening, although he expected it to be for longer—representing his employer on some business.”

“I’m sorry, Miss Montrose.”

When Thorne tried that smarmy smile on Felicity, Griffin wanted to punch the arsehole.

“But ye cannae leave me partially satisfied like that.”

Then the bastard *winked*, and Felicity blushed, and Griffin actually took a step toward him, intending to carefully strangle his friend.

Bull darted between them, his words spilling out with the same frantic movements his hands employed when he had too much energy. “Armstrong is in our house because Marcia and I couldnae use *this* address, he’d never believe all five of us lived here, and he had to meet with Griffin *and* Flick together, as well as the rest of us, because he thinks they’re married.”

That shut Thorne up.

The blond man blinked, then glanced at each of them in turn, as if looking for the joke. “I suspect ye’ll have to give me that again, slower, lad. Griffin *has* been married. I dinnae ken about yer mother.”

“No, milord,” interrupted Marcia shyly. “Mr. Armstrong thinks Papa and Flick are married *to each other*.”

Thorne's gaze dropped once more to the spot where Felicity had been holding Griffin's hands—and he could swear he still felt her heat. Then the bastard's lips curled thoughtfully. “That is...remarkably convenient. Does anyone want to explain to me *why* the Duke's secretary believes that to be the case?”

Luckily, Griffin didn't have to. He just folded his arms and allowed Bull and Marcia to fall over themselves in their haste to explain to Thorne about the stupid contest Peasgoode had published, and how they'd applied, and the *lies* they'd told—*och*, the lies!

But Griffin noticed Bull said nothing about the latest “lie”, the one about Griffin being a spy. Clever lad.

Thorne's hands were on his hips as he listened with a thoughtful expression on his face, his gaze occasionally slipping across the room to study Felicity, the occasional smile gracing one antic or another. But as the children's explanations slowed into silence, the man finally nodded.

“I think...I think, believe it or no’, this was exactly what we needed.”

Really, there wasn't anything else to say but, “*Bull shite.*”

“Nay,” Felicity's son quipped with a grin, “It's *Bull, ye Little Shite.*”

Those had been his words, and a reluctant grin tugged at Griffin's lips.

Thank fook his beard hid it.

Thorne turned his charm on the two children. “Miss Marcia, Bull, I *hate* to do this, but would ye mind giving yer parents and me some privacy?”

“Why?” challenged Marcia, jaw set mulishly. “So ye can talk about taxes?”

“Taxes?” Felicity murmured, beside him.

His daughter rolled her eyes and heaved a sigh. Bloody hell, when she had an attitude, she really reminded Griffin of

himself, didn't she? "When Papa doesn't want us to listen to an adult conversation, he says it's about taxes."

Of course, the only other adult he ever spoke to around the children was Mrs. Mac, but it had become a handy fib. As far as he could tell, both Marcia and Rupert equated *taxes* with *adulthood*, and were terrified of each.

"Really?" Bull seemed interested. "When Flick doesn't want me listening in on a conversation with one of her friends, she claims it's about sex."

Griffin nearly choked—which was impressive, considering he wasn't doing anything more complex than breathing—but swung his gaze to the woman beside him. The woman who was currently blushing as red as her hair.

She frowned defensively. "I am new at this parenting lark. It was the best I could come up with, and it always chases Bull away."

The thought of Felicity speaking frankly about sex to *anyone* made his cock hard. Which was damned inconvenient.

A little voice in the back of his head asked, *Why is she new at this if the lad's sixteen?* but was currently being drowned out by the rest of him, which couldn't seem to stop thinking of words like *lips, tongue, slit, sex, slick, throb, plunge, scream*.

He swallowed.

There might've been other things going on in the room. Fires, the Royal Pipes and Drum Corps' annual display of countermarching and tripping, prehistoric lizards, the Queen herself in her nightrail... But Griffin's entire attention was on the woman blushing prettily beside him.

The woman who, only a few hours ago, had asked him to kiss her. *Debauch* her.

Fook her.

God Almighty, he wanted to. Wanted it more than he'd wanted anything.

But he wouldn't.

Because she was a lady, and he was...

He was a fool.

Luckily, Thorne had apparently retained his ability to speak. “Miss Marcia, I can promise ye this conversation is *no*’ about taxes, and Bull—nay, dinnae look at me like—Christ, lad, ye have a verra punchable face.”

“I ken!” Bull quipped cheerfully. “Rourke says it’s going to get me in trouble one day.”

“One day?” muttered Marcia sarcastically, then she squealed.

Bull must’ve pinched her.

Ye really need to stop staring at Felicity and start paying attention to what the hell is going on.

Right. In just a moment...

“My point is,” Thorne continued in an exasperated tone, “I need the pair of ye to piss off. Rupert’s with Mrs. Mac, and I need to talk yer parents into staying married.”

There was the sound of the children leaving, but it wasn’t until Griffin saw the surprise—or was that horror?—on Felicity’s face, that he registered what Thorne had said.

His brain started working again, thank fook, and he whirled back to Thorne. “*What?*”

“Peasgoode inviting ye to his home, Griffin, it’s more than we could’ve hoped.” Thorne seemed strangely excited. “We’ve been looking for a way in.”

When he glanced back at Felicity she’d wrapped her arms around her middle again, in that way she had of trying to make herself look smaller. Dear God, he’d barely known her yesterday—aside from the whole threatening-at-knifepoint misunderstanding—and now he could recognize her moods?

Instinctively he reached for her, wrapping one arm around her shoulders as he turned them both to face Thorne. He tried not to think of how good she felt pressed against him. Tried to think of this as just like comforting Marcia.

It didn't work.

“Thorne...” Griffin struggled to keep his frustration from his tone. “The bairns just told ye this whole thing has been a lie. Lies built upon lies, really. They told Armstrong I was a spy, for fook's sake!”

Thorne, the insightful bastard, was eyeing Griffin's arm around Felicity with a faint smirk on his lips. “And is it *all* a lie?”

“Yes!” Felicity burst out. “Yes, of course! Griffin—*Mr. Calderbank* and I are *not* married!”

Aye, lass, but ye asked me to show ye pleasure.

“I ken, Miss Montrose, but...” With a sigh, Thorne crossed to the desk and leaned one hip casually against it, as if this were his home and he were the one conducting the interview. “This is the sort of opportunity we need, and never expected to get.”

“Explain,” barked Griffin.

Thorne inclined his head. “I'm hoping Felicity kens about the investigation, enough that I can speak freely in front of her...?”

Griffin turned to her. Fook, as far as he could tell, she knew almost as much as *he* did about the hunt for William Blackrose, and that was with Thorne stopping by weekly to give him updates!

Several years back, Blackrose had decided the “spy” ring he was running—the ring which wasn't working for the British government at all, unbeknownst to the men involved—had earned him enough money, and he needed to disappear. He'd started killing off his agents, or—in the case of Griffin—having them kill one another.

Then last year, one of his last remaining agents, Sophia Cuny, had escaped him with a cache of evidence and run to Rourke Lindsay, once known as Blackrose's Blade, now the Duke of Exingham. The one somehow related to Bull—a cousin, perhaps? Together, Exingham and Miss Cuny had lured Blackrose out into the open. The man had escaped, but

he'd done so thinking the evidence against him had been destroyed.

The news had kindled a tiny spark of hope in Griffin's chest.

After Rourke and Sophia's marriage, the pair of them had worked with Thorne and a former partner, Demon Hayle—now the Duke of Lickwick—to trace Blackrose. Part of the scheme had been to buy Blackrose's brother's debt, which his daughter offered to pay. The plan hadn't worked out quite as they'd imagined, but with Demon now married to Blackrose's niece, they'd been able to track him to his hiding spot in Canada.

Now that Blackrose's crimes were known and he was being actively hunted, Griffin had felt it safe enough to bring his family back to London. And now that he was here, Thorne had kept him updated with weekly reports. The viscount was confident they would be able to track down the bastard and drag him—or lure him—back to Britain. Once here, they'd trap him with the evidence Exingham was keeping safe.

But...Griffin couldn't take on this fight. His family had to come first.

Until Blackrose was dead, Marcia and Rupert were in danger.

But Thorne was leaning against his desk, looking expectant. And next door there was a man who believed all sorts of lies about Griffin, who wanted to make him a *duke*. A God-damned *duke*!

Right now, listening to what Thorne had to say seemed somehow the lesser of the two evils. "Aye," he managed to croak. "Aye, tell us everything."

"Verra well." Thorne took a deep breath, then settled himself more comfortably. "Ye ken we've been keeping track of Blackrose and his correspondence. We've noticed a biweekly packet shipped to him, from Peasgoode."

"The duke?" Felicity interrupted, aghast.

The blond man shrugged. “Possibly. Possibly someone near to him, or someone working on his orders. Such as his secretary.”

“What do the packets contain?” Griffin could feel Felicity trembling, which was strange, considering how strong she was. He squeezed her.

Again, Thorne shrugged. “We dinnae ken. Blackrose is getting money from somewhere. We thought it was his brother, the Earl of Bonkinbone, but it’s possible Peasgoode is supplying him with funds to hide in Canada. If it *is* Peasgoode, then the man is either as guilty as Blackrose, or is being blackmailed.”

Griffin growled, “Either way, he’ll have access to Blackrose.”

“Aye, exactly. Rourke and I have been trying to arrange a meeting with Peasgoode, but the man never leaves his estate.”

“His secretary says he is quite infirm and elderly,” Felicity offered in a small voice.

“Aye, that’s what we’ve heard as well.” Thorne shifted with a wince. “And we cannae verra well march up to Peasgoode—do ye ken how remote the place is? Nae reason to accidentally find ourselves there—and demand what he’s sending to Blackrose. We need to be more subtle. Letters and bribes havenae worked so far, nae one claims to ken anything.”

And here Griffin had been *invited* to Peasgoode. Thorne was right; this was a golden opportunity.

The only issue was that his children would have to go with him.

The children—and Felicity—were the cover story he needed to get access to the elderly duke. Once on the estate, Griffin was confident he could sniff out subterfuge and discover why Peasgoode was sending information, and possibly money, to Blackrose.

But to do so, he’d have to risk Marcia and Rupert. And Bull. Though that was less of a worry.

Was it worth it? *Nay*, of course not!

Griffin's mind raced. But...if bringing them to Peasgoode meant that he could help defeat Blackrose once and for all, it would mean they'd be safe. They'd never have to spend their lives looking over their shoulder, as Griffin did.

He squeezed his eyes shut.

Fook.

Fook fook fooking shite fook.

For years, his entire *world* had focused on keeping them safe, ensuring Blackrose couldn't harm his family again. And now he had the chance to end Blackrose...by willingly jumping back into the fire!

When he opened his eyes again, it was to see Thorne watching him with something like pity in his eyes, damn the man! He *knew* what Griffin had been through to keep Marcia and Rupert safe, and now this...?

The absolute kick-in-the-ballocks is that Griffin knew—*knew*—what his answer would be. And suspected Thorne did as well, hence the pity.

Aye, his children's safety was paramount. But for Mary, for the Queen, for his fellow agents, for poor Wilson—the agent he'd been sent to kill—and for Britain herself...Griffin knew what his answer would be. *Had* to be.

Blackrose had to pay for the innocent lives he'd taken, for the state secrets he'd sold, and for the families he'd broken.

Griffin was surprised to feel Felicity sigh and press her cheek against his shoulder.

He released her, sliding his hold down to her forearm, and turning her to face him. "Flick, I cannae ask ye to do this with me."

Her smile was a little sad, but determined. "You do not have to. We are your cover story, Griffin. We are the only way you—anyone—can get into Peasgoode." She reached up and patted his chest, then left her palm over his heart. "We will do

this. And I swear, Bull and I will do everything we can to keep your children safe.”

Oh God.

He couldn't argue with a vow like that.

With a muted growl, he pulled her against him, pressing her chest to his so he could feel her heartbeat, and she could feel how much he wanted her.

Over her simple coiffure, he met Thorne's eyes. “Find Mrs. Mac and tell her to start packing that pocket of hers for Scotland. I suppose it's up to us to tell Mr. Armstrong we'll accept his offer of hospitality.”

And just pray he wasn't making the biggest mistake of his life.

CHAPTER 8

FELICITY FORCED a smile as she stepped back into the dining room. Mr. Armstrong was focused on his pudding—her cook did really wonderful puddings—and didn't seem any worse for having been left for so long.

On the other hand, if he was only now partaking in dessert, perhaps it wasn't all that long. Felicity normally had a very good internal clock, thanks to years of working in her dark room...but tonight had been difficult.

Imagine, having one's entire world changed between dinner and dessert!

It had all seemed a lark, but now...

She swallowed and crossed to the table. "Mr. Armstrong, thank you *so* much for indulging us."

His smile seemed genuine as he invited her to sit. "Not at all, Mrs. Calderbank. I can imagine this was all quite a shock to you and your husband, considering you hadn't been aware your children had applied on your behalf!"

As soon as she sat, a footman slipped a bowl of the sweet dessert in front of her. But with her stomach all in knots, Felicity doubted she could enjoy it.

"It *was* a bit of a surprise." She pushed the bowl away from her. "And remember, please do call me Flick."

"And you will call me *Ian*, Flick," he repeated with a smile. "Such an unusual nickname."

“Bull gave it to me.” How much to reveal? “His real name is James, after—after his father. But he is fond of nicknames.”

The older man was watching her shrewdly, as he finished off the last bite of his pudding. “Yes, I wondered about that, as soon as I saw you all together. Your hair and eye color is *quite* distinctive. Although the children didn’t mention it in their letter, I have to assume yours is a blended family. Bull is your son, and...?”

“And Marcia and Rupert were from Griffin’s first marriage,” she finished quietly, hoping he wouldn’t press for more details.

Luckily, he didn’t.

With a satisfied sigh, the secretary replaced the spoon. “Well, it makes no matter, anyone with eyes can see you are a family, in every sense of the word. You might not have birthed Marcia and Rupert, but it’s clear you love them as your own.”

Was it?

Perhaps you are a much better actress than previously expected.

She resisted the urge to pull off her spectacles and pinch the bridge of her nose. She could see without them, but right now she needed every advantage she could manage.

“Well, *Flick*,”—he seemed particularly charmed by her nickname—“the meal was delicious. Whatever your husband’s occupation, I see you have a first-rate chef.” He looked about the room in satisfaction, one long finger tracing the handle of the silver spoon.

Felicity hesitated, trying to guess which reply would be the most wifely. She’d had no experience, after all.

This room, this house, the cook and the footman and even the stodgy old butler... The comfortable, if secluded life she led...all of this had come from her investments. And those investments had been started, not by her father, who’d been a baron with little money and less sense, but by Exingham.

Exingham’s bribe, his blood money.

“I...” Felicity swallowed. “My husband is a clerk, Mr. Armstrong. *Now* he is a clerk.” She hoped, by emphasizing that, he might assume whatever lies the children had told were in the past. “He has never been completely comfortable with the fact I brought money of my own into—into our relationship.”

Into the marriage.

The marriage which didn’t exist.

She glanced at the footman, who was doing a masterful impression of staring at the drapes, if one didn’t notice how his ears twitched. Lord only knew what stories he and the butler would be telling tonight beneathstairs. She paid her servants enough to ensure loyalty—an unwed lady scientist with a teenaged son *needed* to know her servants could be trusted—and she could only hope those stories could be kept from Ian.

Who was, even now, reaching over to pat her hand. “I understand, Flick. The children’s letters described your photographic advances with great delight, and I imagine the patents you hold must have brought in much income.” *Approximately a teaspoonful*, but she didn’t say it out loud. “Although I would guess the glory was more important.”

He winked, and she flushed, wondering how this stranger could guess her feelings so readily.

“Now, my dear, I hope you and your family are prepared to accept the duke’s hospitality for the rest of the summer?”

Ah, and here it was. Felicity tried to keep her expression serene. *Griffin was a spy. Try to be like Griffin. Without the grumpy growls and the remarkably alluring scent.*

“You have to understand this was quite a shock to us. That being said...Griffin *would* make a marvelous duke, and I think His Grace would enjoy meeting him—and the children, of course. You will hopefully allow us a few days to get our affairs in order, to pack and so forth...” She took a deep breath. “But yes. Yes, my husband and I would be delighted to accompany you to Peasgoode.”

“Excellent!” His excitement burst forth as he slapped the table, then stood and offered his hand. “I shall acquire train tickets for us all, leaving the day after tomorrow. In the meantime, I believe you said you had a chamber I might occupy?”

“Of course,” she said as she led him toward the stairs, her mind already jumping ahead to what they’d need to leave so quickly, considering half of them didn’t even live in this house.

As they walked together, Ian continued to chatter. “Usually, when I’m in London, I stay with my nephew. My sister’s son, who now holds the title.”

“Oh?” she murmured, mind whirling with plans and lies and subterfuge.

“Indeed,” he chuckled. “I’m not one to name-drop, but the lad—goodness, he’s not a lad any longer, he’s as big as *two* men—is a duke, and his mother and sisters are dear to me. But they’re currently at his country estate, and while I’m certain I could prevail upon his housekeeper for a few days...?”

When he trailed off hopefully, she understood what he was asking. Gluing what she hoped was a welcoming smile to her lips, she turned to him at the first landing. “Indeed, Ian, you are more than welcome to stay with us. Our family. But”—she hurried to add—“I must ask you to please ignore any noise you hear in the corridor this evening. My family will likely be bustling about, packing.”

And trying to figure out exactly how we are going to trick you into believing we are actually a family!

She managed to keep her smile intact right up until the door to his chamber closed behind him. Then she gathered up her skirts and all-but-ran for her study.

The secret door was open, and Marcia was backing through it, helping Rupert with a small chest.

“What is that?” Felicity hissed, rushing to help the pair.

“My clothes and books,” Rupert said matter-of-factly. “We’re going to sneak them into Bull’s room.”

“You know,” panted Marcia, struggling with the trunk, “you once told me some old Greek guy claimed happiness didn’t lie with possessions.”

Rupert flashed a grin. “Democritus. He said true happiness comes from within. But he obviously wasn’t talking about books. Books are the very *heart* of happiness, because they give us knowledge, which is within.”

“*Ooof*. Within what? And lift your end higher!”

“Within our hearts.”

Goodness, the lad could sound smug, couldn’t he?

“And I’m lifting as high as I can. *You’re* the one who is tripping over that ridiculous split skirt.”

“Ridiculous? It’s the next best thing to trousers!”

“Why not just wear trousers?”

“*I’m trying*, but Mrs. Mac says it’s indecent! Now lift your end higher, please!”

Felicity left the siblings bickering and slipped through the secret door, noting how dark it was already. Goodness, it had been a long day, hadn’t it?

A long few days.

To think, last week she’d known her neighbor only as the writer of cantankerous, demanding notes.

And then she’d rubbed herself against him in the dark, and sparks had started in her mind, and across her skin.

“Griffin?” she whispered into the dim interior, her neck craning about. “Bull?”

“Flick!” Her son was grinning as he all-but-tripped down the steps, his arms full of carpetbags. “Mrs. Mac is upstairs packing the rest of Marcia’s gowns, although I told her Marsh wasnae going to wear them.”

Felicity put a hand on his arm to stop him. “Surely, in a duke’s residence, she will want to dress appropriately?”

“Nay,” he drawled with a grin. “I’ll wager ye anything ye want that she uses this as an excuse to break out the trousers.”

Remembering the argument she’d just encountered, Felicity grimaced. “I would not take that wager. Where is your—where is Griffin?”

Judging from his grin, Bull noticed her slip. “He’s up in his chamber, muttering to himself about which evening coats to pack. He wouldnae take my advice.”

“I cannot imagine why,” she deadpanned. Her son had remarkable fashion sense, but a sometimes-close-to-unbearable impudence. “Be careful sneaking those to the room we picked for Marcia—I am afraid Ian will pop his head out and see us apparently moving in.”

Bull was, as always, cocksure. “If he does, I’ll tell him we’re rehearsing for a play.”

“In the middle of the night?”

“Sure, everyone knows acoustics are better in the middle of the night. That’s why we need these bags.” He lifted them slightly, his expression so serious it had to be faked. “To carry them.”

Carry the acoustics?

She patted his arm again, trying to hide her grin. “You are becoming remarkably good at this lying business, darling. Should I be worried?”

“Nay.” He leaned down and kissed her cheek, then winked. “I wouldnae lie to ye, Flick.”

Bemused, she lifted her fingertips to her cheek and watched him slip through the secret door, which stayed open behind him.

He’d kissed her? In the months since he’d returned to live with her, their relationship had been stilted, awkward. Each *wanted* to show the other affection, and receive it in return... but it was as if neither knew exactly where to start.

Apparently a relationship built on lying to other people can bring two closer together. Who would have guessed?

In a bit of a daze, Felicity climbed the main stairs. As she drew close to the main chamber, she heard Griffin muttering. He sounded angry.

What else is new?

This grouchy neighbor of hers was foul-tempered, rude, and more than a little dangerous. So why was she drawn to him so inexplicably?

She was a *scientist*. It was her job to delve into enigmas and search for answers. Surely that was the only reason she couldn't seem to stay away from the man?

Couldn't seem to stop imagining his lips on hers, his hands on her skin?

“What are ye doing here?”

And why did her heart speed up when she heard his growls?

Shaking her head at her own foolishness, Felicity stepped farther into the room. It looked as if a tornado had run through it. Griffin seeming to employ the age-old packing method of “throw everything on the bed, then pick it up and cram it somewhere.”

Well, she could help there, could she not? Felicity began to sort the clothing into piles. “I came to help. Ian—Mr. Armstrong is in his room, and I do hope he remains there. If he sticks his head out, he will wonder about the unusual level of activity. My maid is packing for me.”

“Mrs. Mac will be coming with us.”

It wasn't a request, but a declaration, so Felicity nodded. “Do you want your socks in with your trousers—”

“I said Mrs. Mac will be coming with us. I'll have her fold.” His voice dropped to a mutter. “Likely she'll just stuff everything into those apron pockets of hers.”

“I can just as easily fold—”

Her offer cut off with a squeak when Griffin slammed a pile of shirts down beside her with far more violence than

normal linen-transport required.

“Why are ye doing this?”

When she turned, he was standing entirely too close. “Because...I can fold as well as the next person?” she whispered.

“Nay, Flick.” His voice was gravely, his grip harsh when he took her upper arms. “Why are ye doing *this*? All this? I ken why *I* have to do it, but why are *ye*...” He trailed off, his blue gaze darting across her visage, as if looking for the truth.

“I know what is at stake, Griffin. It was my son who undoubtedly started this chain of actions and reactions which have led us to this moment. Helping bring it to its conclusion was the least I could offer.”

“Blackrose is a dangerous bastard who deserves—” He cut himself off with a quick shake of his head. “Nay. I ken what he *deserves*, but what he’s going to get is a public trial and a lifetime in the darkest pit of a prison.”

And she could help put him there. “Griffin, I understand.”

“Nay, ye dinnae!” He sounded...tortured. “Ye dinnae understand *any* of this!”

Well, that was a tad insulting. “Then *help* me to understand.”

His nostrils flared as he inhaled, but the breath didn’t seem to calm him. “Four years ago, he gave me a mission. A mission I didnae like, to kill a fellow agent named Wilson, who Blackrose said was a traitor. When it was done, I went to Blackrose and told him I was quitting. Told him I couldnae live with myself any longer, and I wanted out. Of course, I thought he was taking his orders from the Prime Minister, but even then...”

With a muttered curse, he broke away, raking both hands through his dark hair, tugging at the strands, as if he could pull the memories from his head. The scars on his knuckles stood out, and she swallowed thickly, thinking of the horrible things he’d been forced to do, thinking they were right.

“The bastard told me I couldnae leave, that if I did, he would see to it my family suffered.” Griffin’s voice had turned bleak, but there was fury in his gaze. “The next day, my wife began to sicken.”

Felicity gasped. “Was Blackrose to blame?”

“I didnae see how, but I wasnae thinking clearly at the time. Mary had been healthy, and then she wasnae, wasting away in the most terrible, painful of ways. Her eventual death was a mercy, less than a week later, and I... *Fook me.*” Whirling away from her, he hooked his hands behind his neck and dropped his head back to gaze at the ceiling. In a harsh voice, he continued. “I panicked. I packed up the children and whatever we could manage, and fled to America. Thank God for Mrs. Mac, or who knows how we would’ve survived. I can burn water.”

The grim humor did nothing to alleviate the ache in her chest. Felicity stepped closer, placing her palm on his broad back. “You would have managed, Griffin. I am certain.”

“It took a year before I could think straight, and then I found the answer I didn’t realize I’d needed in one of Rupert’s textbooks, of all places. Mary’s symptoms were similar to arsenic poisoning.” He shrugged. “But they could’ve also just been caused by an intestinal disease none of us caught. I dinnae ken.”

Her stomach heaved at the thought. The poor woman. Those poor children, watching someone they’d loved go through that. Poor Griffin, wondering if he’d been partially to blame.

“I believe he poisoned her.” His raspy whisper seemed to echo throughout the room. “Somehow, he poisoned Mary because I was trying to leave him. I couldnae let him hurt Marcia or Rupert, so I ran like a coward.”

Her fingers curled into the wool of his jacket, as if trying to hold him steady. “You are no coward, Griffin Calderbank.”

“I ran.”

The whisper was so faint, she wasn't certain she was supposed to hear it. But her heart clenched nonetheless. With a little sound of sorrow, Felicity snaked her arms around his waist from behind, pressing her cheek to his back, *willing* him to accept her comfort, her strength.

The sorrow he'd endured made her chest ache, and she would bargain with the very devil if she could take away some of his pain.

But she tried to keep her voice matter-of-fact. "Griffin, if Blackrose *did* murder your wife, then we will do everything we can to bring him to justice."

He didn't say anything for a long while, then his hands dropped to his sides as he heaved a sigh. "Blackrose might no' be at Peasgoode, but if the duke is in contact with him, we cannae trust the duke, either. I cannae allow ye or the children to be in danger."

Perhaps impulsively, she blurted out, "I trust you to keep us safe," then sucked in a startled gasp as he turned in her arms.

Suddenly she was pressed against his *front*, the same way she'd been just two nights ago, in the dark of his home. The same way he'd held her downstairs in his study, when Thorne had explained their mission.

And she felt *every. Single. Part of him.*

His hands bracketed her cheeks, his fingertips resting under her ears, tipping her head back to stare up at his dark and angry gaze. "Flick," he growled.

That was it. Just her name. No, not her *name*, the silly nickname Bull had—

And then she ceased thinking, because his lips had claimed hers, and rational thought was just impossible in the face of the new sensations coursing through her body.

Was this her first kiss? She couldn't recall a previous one, not from old Exingham, not from anyone. If there *had* been another kiss, all those years ago, it would have been *nothing* compared to this.

With a little whimper, Felicity tightened her hold on him, desperate for him not to release her. Not to cease his sweet torture.

His lips worked over hers, his skin rough, the wiry hairs on his chin tickling her. When his tongue brushed against the seam of her lips, hers parted joyfully, eager for his lessons.

This! *This* was the answer to the question she hadn't understood enough to ask!

The sensations burning through her were unfamiliar, delightful, terrifying. She pushed herself up on her toes, trying to bring herself closer to him...but the movement brushed her pelvis against the steel rod in his trousers, and the flash of pleasure nearly blinded her for a moment.

There. She needed pressure *there*, on the junction of her thighs...so she did it again, sliding along his body, using his hard length for her enjoyment. And when he groaned, she captured it with her lips and felt it—felt his *desperation*—in her own chest.

Yes yes yes please yes now harder please God yes.

Perhaps he heard her unspoken plea.

With another groan, his hands slid down her neck to her shoulders, then her arms, until he was holding her tightly against him. His tongue continued to instruct hers, and she thought she might die from pleasure.

Whimpering again, she gyrated her hips, desperate for the release of *whatever* this was building inside of her...

And with a gasp, Griffin pulled his lips away from hers. "Fook, Flick," he breathed, panting, glaring down. "Where did ye learn to kiss like that?"

Still dazed, she answered with the first thing that came to her mind. "From you."

From the rueful curve of his lips, he didn't believe her.

Her hands dug into his sides, instinctively trying to prevent him from setting her away from him, but he managed anyhow.

His motions were all business now, none of the desperate, angry man who'd kissed her mere heartbeats ago.

"Griffin?" she hazarded, uncertain how one was supposed to handle this situation.

"I'll finish packing." He turned away, but not before she saw the bulge in his trousers. The bulge she'd been rubbing against.

The bulge she wanted to feel again. Wanted to *taste*.

Wanted to taste? Good heavens, that was...that was rather disgusting, wasn't it?

Page twenty-seven in A Harlot's Guide. The Suppliant Swan. The participants appeared to be enjoying it, so it is no wonder the thought of tasting him makes your thighs clench and your core drip.

A dripping core? Felicity closed her eyes in mortification at her subconscious's observation. That was new.

"Flick, get out of here." This time, his tone sounded less certain, more...in pain? "Go help yer maid finish packing, show her how good ye are at folding. Go ensure the children have everything they need. Just *go*."

Oh. Oh, he was kicking her out. After that kiss? That amazing, life-altering kiss, he wanted her to just...walk away?

Yes, after that kiss, having some time to sit quietly in your room and think about things might be exactly the sort of thing you need.

So Felicity took a steadying breath. "And will you be joining us?" It was the most polite way she could think of to remind him that Peasgoode's secretary thought them married, and would expect them to share a chamber.

The way he shook his head made him look almost like a wild animal, caged and livid. "I cannae allow distraction, Flick. I'll sleep here tonight and sneak over before breakfast."

There were problems with that solution as well. "No," she said, pretending she was interested in this conversation, and

not hurt at the way he'd so easily recovered from that kiss. "No, we will just tell Ian you left early for the office."

His chuckle was dark, and she wished she could see his face. "Aye, ye're good at this—this *spy* work."

That hadn't sounded like a compliment, not really.

Without another word, Felicity turned and hurried from his chamber, trying to ignore the dampness between her legs, knowing sleep would be a long way away.

CHAPTER 9

GRIFFIN HAD STALKED past the façade of Felicity's townhouse before he'd even realized how distracted he was.

Ye dobber! Yer anger will be the death of ye!

And that wasn't the worst of it; if he couldn't remember everything he'd learned about spycraft, everything he'd once known about subterfuge and *winning*, his death would be the least of them.

Because now he had to worry about Felicity and aye, even Bull. As if his fears for Marcia and Rupert hadn't been enough...

Blowing out a breath, he shoved his hands in his pockets and continued his angry stomping right past his own front door, to the end of the block, then turned abruptly and returned the way he'd come. Hopefully, if anyone was watching, he'd look like a man who needed to pace off some steam, and not like an idiot who'd forgotten where he supposedly lived.

The things Blackrose had taught him...had never really gone away. Even while hiding in New York, he'd been aware of his surroundings, watching for trouble. Always watching. He'd become good at scanning a busy street, seeing the dangers and dismissing them until they became a threat to his family's safety.

But now, he'd have to do better than just survive.

Now, he'd have to become the aggressor again.

Searching out possible threats, rather than waiting until they came to him...hunting down leads and clues and hoping to God he found them before Blackrose's agents found *him*.

Griffin reached the other end of the block and spun about, wondering if that had been enough to throw any watchers off his trail. Hopefully he wasn't *that* interesting.

Years of living by his wits and his fists had taught him that *hope* wasn't enough to keep body and soul together.

Enough.

Go home. Explain yer new state of fookery, why ye're so angry now. If nothing else, it'll make Ian believe ye're desperate.

Sure enough, the secretary met him in the front hall as Griffin was handing his hat and coat to an impassive footman. Felicity's servants hadn't tattled on their mistress yet, which was good. Yet.

"Griffin!" The older man offered his hand. "Was that you I saw pacing out the front window? Something on your mind?"

Well, best to get it said. "Mr. Steele didnae take kindly to my request for a month's leave of absence." His tone slipped into sarcastic bitterness, which he didn't try to hide. "I've been relieved of my duties at the esteemed firm of Cooke, Books & Steele, and I'd better hope like hell this whole Peasgoode thing works out."

Ian had seemed surprised, but now nodded solemnly. "I cannot make promises, you understand, but I'm confident that His Grace will enjoy meeting you, whatever the outcome. And I'm certain, even if this doesn't work out, the duke will write you a letter of reference for your return."

And Griffin was equally certain that, if he exposed the Duke of Peasgoode as a traitor, the man would rather choke on a sheep than help Griffin find a job.

But of course he couldn't say that, so he just gave the man a nod. A nod was nice and noncommittal. It could mean, *I appreciate what ye're doing for me* or *I think ye're a raging*

wanker but I'm no' in the mood for a fight so I'm no' going to say anything or To each his own, now get out of my way.

Luckily, Ian failed to read the myriad meanings and merely winced sympathetically. “Your wife is in her laboratory, if you’d rather tell her your news right away. I spent a fascinating two hours with her there this afternoon, learning about her photographic apparatuses.”

Griffin had already turned for the stairs, but stopped at the man’s words. A rueful smile tugged at his lips. “Two hours? And how many cats did ye meet?”

“I confess I believe I met every cat in London. How *do* you keep them straight?” The secretary was chuckling.

“I dinnae,” Griffin answered truthfully. “But they’re her... subjects, aye?” He couldn’t very well admit he knew less about his *wife’s* cats than their guest, but he damn well remembered every moment of that unexpected dinner party where she’d explained her work. “So we put up with them.”

“She is fretting about leaving them, but says they won’t travel well.”

An image flashed into Griffin’s mind, of himself and Felicity sharing a private train car, surrounded by a dozen irritated felines. He almost groaned.

“Nay, thank God.”

Ian chuckled again. “Yes, she said you’d say that. But her attention is currently focused on packing her moving picture camera, because I insisted the Duke would be interested in seeing it in action. She’ll just need a different subject.”

“Something with duller claws, hopefully,” Griffin muttered, then gave the man another ambiguous nod and hurried up the stairs.

Felicity was indeed in her study, muttering to herself as she bustled about, pulling mechanical-looking things out of cabinets and placing them carefully in lined bins. There were also jars of liquid—he couldn’t tell what they were, but didn’t seem to be anything he wanted to drink—and carefully sealed containers of what appeared to be photographic plates.

And the cats.

Jesus Christ, the cats were *everywhere*.

Griffin folded his arms and leaned his shoulder against the door jamb, content to take a moment to just watch her. A week ago, he'd known his next-door neighbor as an aggravation, but now he was seeing her in a new light. She really was quite remarkable; caring, intelligent, and apparently, an innovator.

His lips twitched as she tripped over the huge gray feline stretched out on the floor. Also: clumsy.

"Miss Prettypaws," she scolded. "Do you *have* to lay right there?"

The cat, of course, didn't respond, but Griffin must've made some noise—not a laugh, of course, because he didn't laugh—because she glanced up to see him.

And her face? It fooking *lit up*. It lit up in excitement, and he felt something in his stomach lurch in response. The joy in her eyes when she realized it was *him*... Christ, when was the last time anyone besides his children had looked at him like that?

She was a complication he didn't need.

But like a starving man, he wasn't going to push her away. He couldn't.

"Griffin! You are home early!"

Home.

He was in her house. This wasn't *home*.

But he didn't correct her.

"I was fired."

Immediately, her expression melted into something not quite pity, and she started across the room toward him, arms out. "Oh, Griffin, I am sorry. Because you asked for a leave of absence? Well, your employer is a fool—"

He cut her off by holding up his hand, palm out, and staring fixedly at the top of one of her cabinets. He couldn't

stand to see the *caring* in her eyes. “I’m fine,” he barked. “Steele *is* a fool, but I’m a newer employee with what must’ve sounded like a bogus excuse. A wild lie.”

From the corner of his eye, he watched her hands drop to her hips, head cocked to one side. “I suppose it *does* sound rather preposterous. You told him you were going to Scotland to become a duke’s heir?”

“I told him I was going to Scotland to visit the Duke of Peasgoode on business. Steele didnae believe that either. Is that a cat on top of yer cabinets?”

Felicity turned to follow his gaze, and since she wasn’t looking at him, he felt justified watching her lips twitch into an indulgent smile. “That is Ceiling, the kitten you brought me. Apparently he prefers to be up high, so I believe Bull’s name for him is a good fit.”

“Ceiling Cat,” Griffin repeated blandly. “To go with Bureau Cat and Lamp Cat and Carpet Cat?”

She huffed. “Do not be ridiculous! What use would a *Lamp Cat* be to my work? My babies have far more sensible names!”

It would’ve been smart to walk away. He’d told her what she needed to know. There was no use in teasing her, in hoping her face would light up again. It would’ve been smart to remember that.

No one had ever accused him of being smart.

“Och, aye?” His tone was sarcastic, which was the best he could manage to pretend he wasn’t interested. “And what *are* their names?”

She smiled again. He hated it. He loved it. He hated that he loved it.

“Would you like to meet them? I know we will have to leave them here, but I will miss them. *Most* of them.”

“Which ones will ye no’ miss?”

She gestured him deeper into her laboratory. “This monstrosity is Long Cat.” So saying, she scooped up a white

feline under its two front legs, and held it away from her as she turned. “You can imagine why I named him such.”

“Holy fook,” Griffin whispered, genuinely impressed. The animal’s back legs extended almost to her knees. *Long* indeed!

“So *fook* is acceptable to use in polite company, just not around Rupert?” When he scowled, she shrugged cheekily. “I am trying to keep the rules straight in my mind, *dear husband*.”

The reminder of their subterfuge made him shake his head. “Dinnae use *any* curses in front of Rupert. He’s a bit single-minded, so I try no’ to introduce any unsavory concepts into conversation with him, because the lad will belabor them. *Long Cat* is an acceptable name, whereas *Lamp Cat* isnae?”

She didn’t seem fazed by his change of subject. “I do not have a cat who prefers lamps, so until that point, I shall remain without a *Lamp Cat*. *Long Cat* here has been a wonderful subject over the years, but is almost as lazy as *Miss Pretty-paws*.” She nudged the large gray feline with her toe. “I lobbied for *Millicent*, but even at age three, *Bull* was very determined to choose her name.”

Miss Pretty-paws was exactly the kind of name a three-year-old would choose, especially a bairn who was as interested in appearances as *Bull* was.

But she said she was new at parenting.

Instead of asking, he nodded to the animal still stretched from her hands. “And ye willnae miss it?”

“Who? Oh, *Long Cat*?” With a sigh, *Felicity* draped the ridiculously lengthy feline over her shoulder, where it stretched down her back. “No, I *will* miss him. *Long Cat* is old, but puts up with being worn like a fur stole in winter, which is ever so convenient.” She grinned impishly. “And he has been a cooperative subject while working on still photography. He is less helpful when it comes to moving pictures.”

“Because he doesnae move.”

Her smile grew. “Exactly. Now, one troublemaker I will *not* miss is—” There was a clatter from the other side of the room, and she tsked. “She *cannot* seem to stay still. What kind of cat does not understand such a simple concept?”

Before Griffin could ask, a ball of fur streaked past him, careened into a pile of boxes knocking them aside, and darted off again. The cat was small and gray, but moving fast enough she seemed to be a blur of different colors.

“That one is Nyan, and I will have to lock my study to keep her out while we are gone.”

“I cannae imagine she made a good subject.”

Felicity’s smile turned wry. “Not for still photographs, definitely, and with moving pictures she appears only as a rainbow-colored blur.”

“Rainbow?”

“Well, not on the final film, of course, but I cannot figure it out either. Nyan Cat is a mystery, absolutely. And now that the boxes have been strewn about, I expect—oh yes, here he is.”

A long-legged, pale feline picked its way across the floor toward the pile of boxes. He chose the smallest one and stepped into it.

He was larger than the box. It *shouldn’t* have worked. But somehow, the thing folded himself as he sank down, and then it wasn’t so much a cat in a box, as a box-shaped pile of fur with a pair of eyes.

“That,” she announced proudly, “is Sitz. He is my little contortionist.”

Griffin, who was beginning to understand how her mind worked, asked in a sort of horrified fascination, “Because...he sits inside things?”

“If it fits, he Sitz!” Felicity saw his grimace, and burst into laughter. “I admit it is not the most clever of names, but surely it is better than Cheeseburg?”

Remembering the strangely appealing squashed-up expression of the gray cat under the table who’d been begging

for food just like a dog, Griffin's lips twitched ruefully. "Good point, well made."

There were a dozen things he needed to do, including ensuring his children and Mrs. Mac were prepared for their journey. But right now, he couldn't seem to pull himself away from Felicity's study. From *Felicity*.

He pushed away from the door jamb and stepped inside, looking with more interest at each of her apparatuses. "And... what is this for?" He pointed to something which looked like it was made to extract the crisp from potatoes.

Again, her face bloomed into one of those smiles. "You really want to know?"

Griffin had seen her smile. Hell, a moment ago, he'd made her *laugh*. So why was *this* smile so special?

Because ye made her happy. She's smiling because of something ye did, that's why it's so beautiful.

Goddamn, he was well and truly fooked, wasn't he?

But that didn't stop him from saying, "Aye, Felicity, I do."

He told himself it was part of the spycraft, the cover he needed. A man would know about his wife's work, would he not? But that wasn't why he spent the next two hours bent over her shoulder, listening to her explain her brilliance.

It was something else entirely.

BY DINNER, Felicity was utterly exhausted. Her morning had been spent supervising the packing, and with Griffin gone, she'd helped Mrs. Mac sort out what was necessary. She'd been surprised to discover exactly how meager the Calderbanks' possessions were, but remembering what Griffin had said about their flight from Britain, it had made sense.

Bull and Marcia had been helpful in running bags and trunks back and forth between the houses, while Rupert entertained Mr. Armstrong with his esoteric knowledge of first

century Greek philosophers. The entire process had been made more tiring because Felicity and the others had been sneaking around, constantly alert for Ian's presence, and having to lie to him.

The secretary had found her in her study, and asked so many questions about her work, Felicity had been impressed. But she'd felt relief when he'd left...the exact same kind of relief she'd felt when Griffin had arrived.

Those hours with *him*, explaining her inventions and advancements, hearing his thoughts and suggestions...that had been *wonderful*. A strangely invigorating interlude in the middle of an otherwise strenuous day.

And it hadn't just been Griffin's nearness, although that was undoubtably responsible for the way her heart had hammered and breathing had become difficult whenever he'd leaned near her. No, it had been more than that; his *interest*, his obvious understanding.

Her father had refused to acknowledge her scientific interest or talents.

Her brother had called her "strange" and "too smart for her own good".

Exingham hadn't even known of her passions.

Bull...Bull didn't quite understand the science behind her work, but he supported it. Up until today, she'd assumed he'd be the only male who really would.

But Griffin had been interested. He'd even made suggestions, and listened while she—politely—explained how wrong he was.

And not once, not during all those hours, had he frowned at her.

Felicity sighed as the footman cleared away the last of the dessert plates. Not for the first time, she thanked her lucky stars to employ such a faithful staff. They'd kept her secrets for many years, and now they were doing so again, pretending it was perfectly natural to serve the next door neighbors as if they were family.

“Flick, that was delicious,” announced their guest in satisfaction. “And just as last night, the meal was only highlighted by the *fun* of hearing you all interact as a family.”

Considering tonight had been a repeat of the night before, where they’d all tried to stay a step ahead on the lies, it was no wonder there was a headache building behind Felicity’s eyes. Still, she managed a wan smile. “I am so pleased, Ian.”

He grinned in response. “The fact I spent my meal slipping tidbits to a small animal under the table made it even more charming.”

Bull tsked and peaked under the tablecloth. “Cheeseburg! I thought ye were upstairs? Mr. Armstrong, dinnae feed him anything else, the glutton is fat enough!”

“But how can you deny such a face?” The secretary was chuckling. “He looks so pitifully hungry all the time. Besides, doing so made it easier to forget we were being watched.”

Sighing again—this time hopelessly—Felicity frowned up at the chandelier. “I really have no idea how he got up there. I will have to have someone fetch him down.”

“Dinnae fash, Mother.” Bull was chuckling as the small orange kitten shifted his weight, sending the chandelier swaying. “Ceiling willnae remain up there forever. He’s just waiting for us to leave before he leaps down.”

Marcia, whose chin was propped on one hand, watched the small cat. “I *did* spend the dinner in dread of being pounced on.”

“Housecats are evolved from a sort of proto-cat, centuries ago.” Rupert didn’t look up from where he was trying to balance his spoon atop his glass. “Proto-cat was a skilled hunter and used his sharp front claws to climb trees, with his propulsion coming from his strong back legs.” With the spoon balanced, he sat back and grinned at his work. “Ceiling Cat is just displaying such instincts to climb and hunt.”

In the silence after the lad’s statement, Griffin made a small noise, a huff, which absolutely wasn’t a laugh. And yet...

“Perhaps yer next feline should be called Proto Cat, Flick,” he offered with a wry twist of his lips as he brought the wine to his lips. “He’d likely be better at hunting than Cheeseburg.”

Felicity thought she might’ve replied, but her attention was on those lips, the way his tongue swept across them when he finished drinking.

Last night he’d kissed her.

Last night she’d kissed him.

She’d been up half the night—which, now that she thought of it, might explain her fatigue—tossing and turning, thinking of that kiss.

No, not necessarily the *kiss*...thinking of the way the kiss, and his hands, and his *touch*, had made her feel.

Yesterday afternoon she’d asked him to teach her about pleasure. He’d said no.

But then last night, he’d kissed her.

A million years had passed in between, certainly, but where did things stand now?

When they stood from the table, Griffin began to usher the children toward the stairs. Ian gestured toward the sitting room. “I found a book I’ve been enjoying. Unless someone would like a game of chess?”

“I would!” offered Bull eagerly, already turning toward the sitting room.

But Griffin stopped him. “It’s time for bed, lad.”

Bull’s expression turned incredulous. “But Flick lets me —”

“I dinnae care.” Griffin’s expression turned hard and he jerked his head up the stairs, which Marcia and Rupert were already tromping up. “As long as ye live under *my* roof, laddie, ye’ll follow my rules.”

The disgruntled expression Bull pulled was almost laughable. Clearly, Griffin was enjoying his revenge.

And as his “wife”, it was up to Felicity to support him. “Bull,” she chided softly, “tomorrow is a big day, and we all need to be rested.” She tried to indicate, with her eyes, that they needed to appear united in front of the secretary.

Luckily, he seemed to understand. With a sigh and a roll of his eyes, he stomped up the stairs as well.

The older man had seen the power struggle, and now chuckled. “Well done. Although it was many years ago, I remember being a teenaged lad like your son.”

“Do ye have bairns, Ian?” Griffin asked.

“Me?” The older man seemed surprised. “Oh, no. I’ve never been married. When my brother-in-law died, surprising us all, I helped my sister during my nephew’s horrible illness. But after he recovered, she managed him and all of his sisters quite well on her own.”

“Well,” Felicity sighed, “I am learning that having children is a struggle, but a blessing.”

Griffin grunted something which might’ve been an agreement.

“Could I tempt you into a game of chess, Flick?” the secretary coaxed.

Felicity *could* think of a few things she wanted less—tooth decay, a visit from her sister, *taxes*—but not many. She forced a smile. “Please forgive me, Ian, but I believe I shall retire early, and stave off this headache.”

Without giving either man a chance to respond, she turned and hurried up the stairs.

In her chamber, she felt as if she could truly breathe, for the first time all day.

Of course, that might’ve also been because she could finally unhook this blasted corset!

Her maid giggled at the noise Felicity made when her breasts were finally freed, and Felicity herself had to smile ruefully as she held the thing out at arms’ length. “Do you

suppose these were developed by men to be a torture device? Or something more sinister?”

Still giggling, the other woman took it from her. “I don’t know, milady. What kind of sinister?”

“I cannot begin to guess. Something involving wind power and pickles and Antarctica.”

“That does sound sinister.” Her maid, who had been with Felicity for almost ten years now, was still smiling as she picked the pins from Felicity’s hair.

“Oh well,” Felicity sighed, hefting a breast in each hand. “It is not as if we can burn the blasted thing. How else could I possibly contain these things?”

Her mother had been aghast when Felicity had announced her intention to breastfeed her infant son. She’d ranted and railed about how her body would be ruined, and Felicity—who’d spent her confinement reading everything she could reach about human reproduction and child rearing, in order to understand the chaos which had become her life—pointed out that her body and reputation were well and truly “ruined” already.

Mother had not been amused, but Felicity had to admit her breasts *were* larger and sagged more than they had in her youth.

“If only someone could construct something more comfortable, but just as supportive...” Felicity murmured to herself.

“If anyone can do it, you can, milady,” murmured the other woman faithfully, before sending a smile and slipping from the room.

“A better corset,” mused Felicity, as she finished her evening ablutions. “Perhaps something smaller, focused only on the bust region. With some sort of ribbon holding it up via the shoulders?”

Smiling at her naiveté, she pulled back the counterpane and pushed the decorative pillows over to one side. She found

their symmetry pleasing, but they were complete shite to sleep on, all firm stuffing and strange fringe.

But as she sat on the edge of the bed and was lifting her legs to slide beneath the sheets, the door opened.

Miss Pretty-paws and Sitz slipped through, but Felicity gave them approximately zero percent of her attention, because Griffin followed them, jacket slung over one shoulder.

With a gasp, she grabbed one of the decorative pillows—something in green and apparently stuffed with hedgehogs, judging from what poked her when she pushed it against her chest—for modesty. “Griffin!” she hissed.

“*Felicity*,” he hissed right back.

Then he shut the door behind him.

And they were alone together. In her bedroom. And she was in her nightgown. There were cats involved too, but her brain had become rather stuck on *alone together in the bedroom*.

She pulled the pillow closer, then winced when the aforementioned hedgehog stabbed her in an inappropriate place. “Are—are you not staying in your own room tonight? Again?”

Why was she so flustered?

Perhaps it had something to do with the nonchalant way he was pulling off his boot.

“I’m no’, *wife*.” Was the reminder for her, or for him? “Because bloody Ian Armstrong is still in the bloody sitting room with the bloody door open.”

Ah. “And if you went into my study to go through the secret door, he would see you.”

“Exactly.” The second boot joined the first, then he lifted his hands to his necktie. “And so, Flick, ye’re stuck with me tonight.” He glanced around the room, his eyes lighting on the settee arranged near the window for maximum light. “Pay me nae attention. I’ll sleep there.”

“Absolutely not!”

“Look, Miss Montrose—” When he yanked his necktie from around his neck, she saw anger in his movements. “Ye were the one who agreed to this subterfuge! Ye cannae get missish on me now.” The movements were economical, precise as his fingers moved down his waistcoat buttons. “If ye dinnae wish me to dirty yer settee, I’ll sleep on the floor. Willnae be the first time.”

Her throat had gone dry as he shrugged out of the waistcoat. The linen of his shirt was tight across his shoulders, and a tear on the chest had been repaired with neat little stitches. Why had she focused on such a thing, when he was standing there, half-dressed, staring at her defiantly?

Hello? Hello? Her subconscious was trying to get her attention. *He is not just half-dressed, he is in—and I will repeat it, because I believe you are missing something rather important—in. Your. Bedroom. In which you are also half-naked. An opportunity presents itself, perhaps?*

And yes. Yes, she *was* completely intrigued by the idea... but she was also completely and utterly exhausted. That was likely the reason she was arguing with her inner thoughts, dratted things.

He had noticed where she was staring. “What?” His large hand rose to pick at the tear. “Aye, it’s auld, but I couldnae afford to discard it when one of Rupert’s contraptions ripped it.”

Her throat was dry, and her head was pounding. “Who mended it?” As if it mattered.

“Me.” His chin rose defiantly. “Stitching is the same, whether it’s done on flesh or cloth. I’ve done it more than a few times, either way.”

Oh dear. She leaned back against the pillows. “On whom?” she asked weakly.

“Myself, mostly.”

Perhaps that explained the scars on his knuckles. She opened her mouth, but a yawn caught her by surprise, and she

waved in apology.

“Look, Flick, I’m sorry to barge in on yer privacy like this, but the settee *would* be more comfortable than the floor—”

“That was not why I objected.” Goodness, had her pillows ever been this soft? She snuggled lower, pulling the counterpane up and discarding the pillow. “This bed is enormous. It would be foolish for you to endure the settee when we can be reasonable, intelligent adults about this.”

He was watching her warily. “Ye want me to sleep with ye?”

Hadn’t she made that clear? But he’d turned her down.

He needs you now.

What? Well, yes, he *did* need her. What did that have to do with anything?

You could ask whatever you want from him.

Yes, if only she wasn’t literally falling asleep during this argument.

It is not an argument if it is with one’s own brain.

Well then, she was likely going mad.

Likely.

She huffed a sigh. “Griffin, tomorrow will be a long day, and I am extremely fatigued. We both need our rest.”

“I dinnae think this is a good idea.” But he was moving toward the opposite side of the bed.

“Neither do I, but I promise not to attack you.”

“I’m keeping my clothes on.”

Her eyes were already closed as the bed began to shake. “I am happy for you. What *are* you doing?”

“Looking for the bloody sheet. Why in damnation do ye have so many pillows? *Ah*,” he grumbled, and she felt the bed dip as he slid under the blankets.

Since his rude question hadn't required an answer, Felicity allowed her lips to curl upward. As he flopped around, trying to get comfortable, she rolled to one side and reached for the small bedside lamp.

“Goodnight, Griffin.”

He grunted in return, and finally lay still.

In the darkness, she could hear his even breathing, the pattern lulling when it should be strange. The scientific part of her brain vowed to investigate such an anomaly, but exhaustion won out.

As she drifted into sleep, she could swear she heard him whisper, “Sleep well, Felicity.”

CHAPTER 10

HE'D WOKEN up hard and aching, his cock nestled in Felicity's arsecrack. It had been a sort of inevitability, he supposed, but *damn*, did she feel good in his arms. All soft curves covered in softer fabric. He'd wanted to stay like that for another hour—for another year.

But she'd still been asleep and it was better for both of them, and for their subterfuge, if she didn't wake to find his cock probing at her cleft.

So he'd fought his way out of the pile of too many pillows, rolled out of the too-soft bed, and washed his face in too-cold water. It hadn't helped, but it had reminded him to focus on the plan. The mission.

Luckily, he'd transferred his bags to this house yesterday, so he was able to change and hurry down the stairs to find the household already starting preparations for today's journey. Now it was an hour later, and he was faced with a dilemma.

“Marcia, is there anything I can do to convince ye to go back upstairs and change into a skirt?” Breakfast was already hectic enough, but now his daughter had shown up in trousers?

When she planted her fists on her hips and glared at him, Griffin was afraid she was his spitting image. “Papa, we're not going to know anyone on the train. These are more comfortable.”

“I sincerely doubt that.”

“How do you know?” she shot back. “Have you ever worn a skirt?”

From where she was organizing the last of the luggage in the foyer, Felicity called out, “She is right, Griffin. In order to make a true comparison, you will need to experiment with both scenarios.”

“I’m no’ wearing a skirt.”

Marcia grinned. “Well, neither am I!”

“*Fudge*,” he growled.

Felicity straightened. “There is no time now to change. We need to be at the station in an hour, and we are still waiting on Mrs. Mac.” She gestured to Marcia. “Now, trousers or no, do you have the proper”—she glanced at Rupert—“U-N-D-R-C-L-O-T-H-S on?”

Marcia frowned as she worked her way through that misspelling. “Um...I think so?”

“Good. A lady should always be properly...” Another glance toward Rupert. “D-R-E-S-E-D.”

Oh good Lord. Did this have to do with him not wanting to curse in front of the lad?

Griffin had no time to consider, because Ian had flung open the front door and was gesturing to the footmen to begin loading bags. “The carriages are ready! Do we have everyone?”

“Just about,” Griffin muttered, as finally—*finally*—Mrs. Mac came huffing from the direction of Felicity’s study. “Thank God.”

The older woman skidded to a stop beside Felicity’s maid. “Ready, eh?” she announced, then jabbed the younger woman in the side.

Ian seemed to assume she was another servant, and turned to Griffin. “Will your valet be joining us as well? I was surprised you didn’t have me purchase a ticket for him.”

Griffin hesitated. Of course he had no valet, but would the secretary expect him to have one? “Uh...nay. Nay, he doesnae like to travel.”

“That’s a shame.”

It was obvious Ian thought him strange for not insisting his servant overcome his dislike of travel, so Griffin pulled an excuse out of his arse worthy of Bull.

“He has a weak stomach. And nae legs. So I cannae ask him to trek to Scotland.”

“Good Lord, you employ a legless valet?”

“And one with a weak stomach. Ye can understand the dilemma.”

The secretary nodded. “Absolutely. The poor man. Well, His Grace will no doubt assign you an attendant when we reach Peasgoode.” He glanced at the tickets in his hand. “I do have tickets for a maid?”

Felicity’s young maid curtsyed. “That’s me, sir. I’m Made.”

“You’re the maid, miss?”

Another curtsy. “Yes sir. That’s my name.”

Ian frowned. “Your name is Maid?”

“Made, sir.” A third curtsy. “With an E.”

“Mead?” The older man was looking extremely confused.

The small woman bobbed for a fourth time, and Griffin idly wondered how long her knees would last. “Please sir, my name is Made. My mother meant to name me Maude, but spelling isn’t her strong suit. I *am* Miss Montrose’s maid.”

Ian shook his head. “Who’s Miss Montrose?”

Shite. Time to intervene. “Felicity Montrose Calderbank,” he barked. “Made has been with her since before we were married.”

In other words, three days ago.

The older man nodded weakly. “Made is the maid. Logical, in a way. And the last ticket is for...” His brows drew in. “Mrs. Mac?”

“That’s me!” Mrs. Mac announced cheerfully as she popped up beside the surprised secretary. “Thanks very much for handling this, eh?”

“You are Mrs. Mac? MacSquash?”

Griffin corrected, “MacDoodle.”

His housekeeper winked. “You can call me McLovin, handsome, eh?”

When she began to cackle, Ian coughed, then cleared his throat. “I—you are the neighbor, madam?”

“Eh?”

“The neighbor. Who lives next door and young Rupert visits? You taught Marcia how to treat stained tablecloths?”

“Eh? Oh, yes, that’s me. Is your throat paining you? I have a lozenge here.”

With that, Mrs. Mac’s arm disappeared up to her elbow in the pocket of her apron.

The secretary waved away the offer, then cleared his throat again. “I’m just wondering why we’re bringing the next-door neighbor with us to the Highlands—”

“Here it is!” Mrs. Mac brandished a small bag of sweets. “If you don’t care for this brand, I have others, eh?”

Ian glanced down at her apron, then in a sort of daze, took the bag of pastilles. “Thank you.” He cleared his throat yet again. “And you’ll be coming with us?”

Griffin discovered he was having *fun*. “Och, Mrs. Mac comes everywhere with us.”

“Even to the shore?” Ian shuddered.

“Of course!” Mrs. Mac beamed. “I never miss a chance to show off my bathing costume. I have it here, eh?” She delved back into the apron.

Ian paled, shoved the bag of lozenges into his own pocket, and stumbled away. “I’ll go—I’d better check the-the horses.”

“There goes a fine figure of a man, eh?” Mrs. Mac chuckled as she watched him scurry off. “Even if he doesn’t know a thing about horses.”

“I think ye scared him, Mrs. Mac.”

She sighed, and a flask emerged from her apron pocket. “I do that to men. Tea?”

“Nay, thank you.” His hurried breakfast hadn’t sat well with him.

Shrugging, she pulled a teacup from the pocket. “More for me, eh?” she cheerfully announced as she poured herself some. “Now, what’s all this about me being a next-door neighbor?”

“Ye ken...” Griffin was watching Felicity herd the children out the door. “I really have nae idea.”

“You know my name’s MacDougal, not MacDoodle, eh?”

He glanced at his housekeeper. “Really? Are you sure? I thought it was Doodle, all these years?”

She sipped her tea. “Now that you mention it, no, I’m not sure. Heh, I guess Mrs. Mac suits me better. I suppose we’d best hustle, eh?”

The chaos had continued outside. Griffin leaned a hip against the front stoop’s railing, and watched the woman he was supposed to be married to wrangle everyone into their places.

“Bull, take the first coach with Rupert. Rupert, did you R-E-L-E-I-V-E yourself before we left? I do not want to stop on the way.”

His son huffed a sigh. “Relieve is spelled with the I before E. And yes, I did.”

“Oh good.” Felicity sounded frazzled. “I can never keep track of Es and Is, they wander about so.”

“Flick,” Marcia explained from beside her, obviously trying to contain her laughter. “It’s *I before E, except after C.*”

“Yes,” agreed Rupert, “unless you’re *seizing* your *ancient neighbor’s eight beige glaciers*.”

Bull was chuckling, but it was clear Felicity’s strong suit wasn’t spelling. “Is my elderly neighbor likely to own beige glaciers?”

Rupert shook his head. “I was merely exemplifying some of the exceptions to the—You know, never mind. Mrs. Mac does indeed own some glaciers.”

“Oh good, I shall ask her about them.” Distractedly, Felicity all but hoisted the lad into the first carriage, then shooed Ian in after them. “Do behave, lads.” Then she turned to the front stoop. “Griffin, there you are! Come along.”

She ushered Marcia into the second carriage and held out her hand to him. Christ, she was adorable when she was frazzled. He doubted she had any idea how fooking *appealing* she could be, even in that dull blue traveling gown and her hair tied back in that severe bun.

Not for the first time, he wished he could pluck the pins from her hair and watch it fall around her shoulders. Across her skin. Across *his* skin.

He was getting another cockstand.

Which was fooking inconvenient, knowing they had at least a day of travel ahead of them.

Beside the carriage, Felicity gestured impatiently. “Griffin! Stop woolgathering!”

Woolgathering? Who had ever accused him of *that*? With a wry shake of his head, he tripped down the stairs and placed his hand in hers. “So anxious to begin the deception, milady?”

“The *adventure*, Griffin. Besides, we will miss the train, and I refuse to go through this stress again tomorrow. Get in the carriage.”

Well, he couldn’t argue with that reasoning. Fighting the urge to grin, he lifted his counterfeit wife into the carriage, followed her, then nodded to the footman to close the door.

The carriage jolted into motion, and as he settled back against the squabs, he was surprised to feel Felicity's gloved hand slide into his.

Ian was in the other carriage. There was no need for the deception here and now.

But he didn't pull away.

THE HOURS HAD CRAWLED BY, the gentle sway of the train alternately soothing and irritating to Felicity. Ian had procured three private compartments, and their party took up almost the entire car. Truly, the Duke of Peasgoode's wealth was staggering.

And for one evening, Griffin must have believed it could one day be his.

Felicity sat across from him with her maid beside her, and didn't feel ashamed to watch the man masquerading as her husband. He'd spent the journey staring out the window or reading today's newspaper. He seemed to favor *The Daily Movement*, which was her favorite as well, with its reform bent. Apparently, Marcia inherited her revolutionary streak from her father.

Now he sat with his arms folded, frowning at the passing countryside.

He was clearly thinking about something, but she couldn't begin to guess.

When the children had announced their scheme, he'd said he hadn't wanted the possibility of becoming a duke's heir. But he'd done it for Rupert, for Marcia...until it had become too much. *Then* he would've backed out, had Thorne not explained the stakes.

Now he had to know that going along with this, proving Peasgoode a traitor, meant he'd never become the Duke's heir.

And he still did it.

This morning, she'd awoken with one of his large hands resting on her stomach, and his hardness tucked up against her rear.

The sensation had been...strange, but not unwelcome.

Interestingly, it was the way his thumb had rested right beneath her breasts, which had felt so intimate. It was as if he'd...*claimed* her. Held her. Possessed her.

Felicity didn't hate it. Not at all.

Instead, she'd felt just a tiny bit...cherished.

She'd kept her eyes closed and her breathing even, and tried not to remember the way he'd looked when he'd spoken of his first wife's death.

Had he loved her? Did he still dream of her? Did he pretend Felicity was her, even now?

It was likely foolish to think of such things, but she'd never been one to back down from a challenge. She wanted to know. She wanted to know *him*.

He was a mystery, and she'd never been able to resist experimentation until she understood the unknown.

A few days ago, she'd asked him outright to teach her about pleasure. Now, she wanted more. She wanted to know *him*.

But the pleasure thing would be a good place to start, really.

Griffin shifted, and when he stretched and crossed his feet at the ankles, his booted feet brushed against the skirts of her travel gown. He didn't seem to notice, but the simple touch set her heart hammering in her chest.

He *lounged* there on the padded bench, the gentle sway of the train car not seeming to affect him in the least. Occasionally he'd frown, or his nostrils would flare, or he'd blink slowly...all signs of deep cognition.

She wanted to know how he thought.

She wanted to know how he *tasted*.

Oh good Heavens, you are beginning to repeat yourself.

They were stuck together for the next few weeks, and would have to work together to search for the information they needed. They should begin now, so she understood her role by the time they arrived.

So Felicity cleared her throat. “Made? The last time I walked past, Bull and Mrs. Mac were engaged in a lively card game in the compartment next to us.”

The little women managed to bob a curtsey while seated. “Yes, miss. And young Master Rupert had joined in, as had Mr. Armstrong.”

Which meant Marcia was likely bored and ready for some mischief. “Would you be kind as to sit with Marcia for me?” Felicity asked, her attention on Griffin, who now watched her impassively. “If she wants to participate in the game, feel free to join in as well.”

Made packed up her sewing, a small smile on her lips. “Absolutely.” Another bob, on her way out the door. “I’ll take my time, miss.”

“Excellent,” murmured Felicity as the door shut behind the maid.

Griffin lifted a brow. “So eager to be alone with me?”

“Yes. I want to know what the plan is.”

“The plan is to fool Peasgoode into thinking we’re a family. You and the children charm him, while I poke around.” He shifted again, and the movement caused the muscles of his chest to strain against the material of his jacket.

“We would be far more successful if we *all* poked around.”

“Absolutely no’,” he growled. “I’ll no’ put ye in danger.”

“Poking about is hardly danger.”

“Ye’d be surprised.”

This wasn’t going as she’d hoped. Sighing, Felicity stood, turned, and ended up sitting beside him, a respectable two feet between them. But still, his expression had turned disbelieving

as he dropped his arms and twisted so he could keep her in his sights.

“Griffin, I should tell you that Bull already knows our real reason for going to Peasgoode. I do not know how he found out—either listening at the door, I assume, or charming it out of Thorne. It would not be the first time...for either scenario.”

“Has he told Marcia?”

She winced at his bark. And yes, it *was* a bark, a question from a worried father.

“I do not know.” She sighed. “They *are* best friends, but he also is a smart boy. He would not want her to be in danger.” The thought of her son in danger made her stomach hurt, but she had to believe he was smart enough to stay safe.

Griffin watched her for a moment longer than necessary, then nodded sharply. “I’ll have a talk with the lad.”

“He could be helpful.” She scooted a little closer. “So could I.”

“The danger—”

“For goodness’ sake, Griffin! The duke is an old man, and if he *is* in contact with Blackrose Ian has to know about it, as his secretary. And Ian is already utterly charmed.”

“Mainly by ye.”

Another scoot brought her close enough to reach out and lay her palm on his thigh. “All the more reason to allow me to help look for evidence linking the Duke with Blackrose’s schemes.”

His gaze was locked on her hand. It was just resting on his thigh, but his attention was focused on it. Under her palm, his muscles jumped.

My, it certainly was *warm* in this compartment, wasn’t it?

“Flick...” His voice was hoarse. “All ye need to worry about, when we get to Peasgoode, is convincing the Duke we’re one big happy family, aye? The more charmed he is, the longer we can stay.”

Yes, that did make sense. However... “One big happy family?” she mused, shifting on the bench seat so her knees brushed against his. “And I suppose we need to convince him we are happily married as well?”

“Obviously,” he rasped.

Under her hand, his thigh twitched. Warmth was flowing up her arm and through her chest, and down... No, that was a different kind of warmth, a *liquid* warmth, which had started the night he’d pinned her to the wall, and had grown only worse since he’d kissed her.

And this morning, after he’d dressed and hurried from the room, she’d slid her hand down her belly, trying to capture the sensation of his touch. She’d rolled onto her back, inched up her nightgown, and spread her knees. Her fingers had slid along her wetness, and as her touch had become more and more frantic, she’d imagined it was *him* touching her.

It hadn’t been enough.

“You know, Griffin...there is a way to ensure Peasgoode believes we are married.”

Slowly, his gaze rose to meet hers. There was a *something* blazing in those blue depths, something dangerous. “What is that?”

Felicity swallowed, frightened, but not frightened away.

“Share my bed,” she whispered. “Teach me what I want to learn.”

Moving faster than she thought possible, he scooped her hand from his leg, and made as if to toss it aside. But instead he flipped it over and twined his fingers through hers. “I dinnae have to teach ye anything, Flick. Ye’re smart. Yer husband taught ye what ye need to ken.”

And before she could stop it, the admission slipped out. “I was never married.”

His expression slid into something softer. It wasn’t pity, it wasn’t confusion. But he had questions, she knew. She knew it as surely as she knew she didn’t want to answer them.

He told you about the death of his wife.

Yes, but Exingham, what he'd done... She wasn't ready to share that.

Not yet. Not ever.

So she took a deep breath. "Griffin, I want—no, I need to understand this. And if you want Peasgoode to believe we are happily married, this is what needs to happen."

His fingers briefly spasmed around hers. "Are ye saying... if I dinnae sexually pleasure ye, ye willnae perform yer end of this subterfuge?"

That wasn't what she'd been saying at all. And she would tell him that. Right after her brain started working again.

But now she could only think of the shape his mouth had made as he'd said *sexually pleasure ye*, and really, how could she be blamed?

"Ah." It was all Felicity could manage. "Ahhh."

Her tongue seemed to be stuck on that sound.

Perhaps it will be the sound you make when he touches your cunny.

Oh. Ahh.

Ooooh.

"Christ, Flick, ye drive a hard bargain."

And then his free hand was on her neck, pulling her closer, and his mouth was slanting over hers.

Suddenly, she didn't mind in the least that he'd completely misunderstood her words.

This kiss was hard and fast and hot. Somehow, her lower lip ended up between his teeth, and when he sucked, she made an embarrassingly *moist* sound.

Her lip popped free and that analytical part of her brain, the part that always noticed things, noticed that he was breathing as heavily as she was.

“Is that how ye want it?” Griffin rasped, his face close enough to hers she was in danger of going cross-eyed, were she worried about something as trivial as *sight* when there were all these glorious *feels* to contend with. “This is what it’ll take to keep yer cooperation on this mission?”

Her mouth was still opened, but the only sound which emerged was another sort of, “Ah.”

“*Fook*,” he hissed.

“Ah—I do not want.” Felicity closed her mouth, swallowed, then tried again. “Griffin, if you are uncomfortable with this, with *me*, I am not blackmailing—” Well, she rather *was*, wasn’t she? “I mean, only if this is something *you* want —”

“Want?” His laugh wasn’t very amused. “*Fook* aye, I want it. I’m a man, are I no’?”

And with that, he took her hand, flipped it over once more, and pressed it against the lump in his trousers. The long, hard length of his-his *penis*.

Felicity’s fingers curled around it, entirely without her control.

Her mouth watered, and her breathing became as uneven as his.

“This is it, Flick. Ye want this?”

“Yes,” she breathed, fear and hope warring within.

He closed his eyes on a groan of surrender. “Then ye’ll have it.”

With that, he pulled her close again, his lips claiming hers.

Joy spiked in her stomach, joy and anticipation and desire unlike she’d ever experienced. Felicity wanted this—she wanted *him*.

As his lips moved atop hers, she lifted herself off the seat and shifted one of her legs over his knee, pressing closer to him, always closer, trying to become *one*. Her hips bucked

against his thigh, her fingers squeezed his hardness, and she whimpered low in her throat.

“That’s it, lass,” he whispered harshly, as his lips moved to her jaw, then that sensitive spot below her ear. “Fooking use me. Take what ye need.”

The throbbing in her core was becoming nearly unbearable, and she began to gyrate against him.

“Griffin,” she gasped, arching in his hold. “*Please.*”

And *that’s* when the door opened.

“We’re coming up on—*oh I say.*” Ian backed out of the compartment so quickly his back slammed against the opposite wall. “Please forgive me.”

Felicity was fairly certain her heart had momentarily stopped there.

She met Griffin’s eyes, and for a moment, swore she saw amusement in them. Then his hands were around her waist, and he was placing her away from him, his movement quick, efficient.

“I’m sorry, Ian, my *wife* and I were a bit overcome.”

The older man’s chuckle seemed forced, and his gaze was locked on the luggage racks over their heads. “No, no, it is I who should apologize. I just wanted to mention we’re approaching Carlisle, and ask if you’d mind if I took the children for a brief tour of the station.”

Leave the children alone with a man who might be in cahoots with Blackrose? Suddenly, the warm feeling of contentment which had filled her moments ago dissipated. Felicity exchanged glances with Griffin.

“I think, Ian,” she offered as she tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, “that some fresh air would do us *all* good. My husband and I will accompany you.”

And this train journey couldn’t be over fast enough. Late tonight, they’d be at Peasgoode, and their own chambers.

With a bed.

And a man who had promised her all sorts of pleasures.

CHAPTER 11

THE FARTHER NORTH THEY TRAVELED, the more...familiar the landscape became.

Griffin hadn't been back to the Highlands for almost two decades, but even from inside the train compartment, he could *smell* the difference in the air, see it in the way the trees moved.

He was home.

And it was fooking disturbing.

His children had never lived in the Highlands; he'd left after he'd married Mary. How could he consider this *home*?

After that incredible, ridiculous, completely ill-advised kiss, after Carlisle, Rupert and Marcia had sat in the compartment with Griffin and Felicity. He'd been glad for it. It meant he'd be able to keep his hands off the redhead who continued watching him with that curious, academic way.

As if she wasn't quite certain of him.

As if she *wanted* to figure him out.

Keep wondering, sweetheart.

She was a danger to this mission, a distraction.

Aye, but she had a good point. If ye want to appear a happily married couple, fooking her regularly will seal the illusion.

But Griffin had the uneasy feeling that whatever he'd be doing with Felicity, it wouldn't be *fooking*.

“Oooh, Papa, look at *that* mountain! I think, if I was standing atop there, I could touch the sky!”

Griffin’s eyes followed his daughter’s pointing finger, and grunted in agreement. “That’s Ben Nevis, the highest point in Britain. It means we’re almost there.”

“And not a moment too soon,” Felicity agreed. “The sun is setting.”

The meal options on the train were simple, but Griffin’s family was used to simple. He’d been surprised how readily Felicity—a lady—had taken to the straightforward fare. And now Rupert’s eyes were drooping.

Hell, they were likely *all* tired.

“When we get there, Father, will we have to be polite to the duke?” his son asked, before being interrupted by a yawn.

“I dinnae ken,” he answered truthfully. “I hope no’.”

When he caught Felicity’s gaze, he saw—was that *excitement*? She was *excited* about the arrival at Peasgoode?

Och, ye dobber, she’s excited about what ye promised her would happen when she arrived in Peasgoode.

Tonight, they’d be sharing a bed.

The memory of holding her last night already made him ache. Tonight would be...

“Rupert, our arrival at Peasgoode will be well past the polite hour for a social call. I believe, unless the Duke is very determined, we shall be allowed to go straight to”—Felicity hesitated—“straight to B-E-D.”

At least she spelled that one correctly.

Griffin sighed. “*Bed* isnae a naughty word, Flick.”

Her adorable—delightful, delicious—lips tugged into a pout. “Well, I am not certain, so I am erring on the side of caution.”

She was the kind of woman who asked a virtual stranger to teach her about pleasure, but also spelled out words she

deemed vaguely naughty. Including *bed*.

She was intriguing.

She was a woman he *very* much wanted to understand.

Still staring out the window, Marcia sighed happily. “It’s *lovely* here, isn’t it?”

Griffin’s gaze was locked on Felicity. “Aye,” he growled. “I grew up no’ far from here.”

“Can we see where ye grew up, Papa?” his daughter asked excitedly.

Not now. Now they had a mission. “Perhaps one day.”

Home.

The thoughts buzzing around his head were giving him a headache. With an irritated snarl, Griffin dragged his hand through his hair and tugged hard, trying to distract himself.

“We will be there soon,” murmured Felicity.

Was she talking to him? He didn’t open his eyes to find out. Couldn’t afford the comfort she offered.

Had to stay sharp. Stay safe. Stay alive.

But she was right; they *did* arrive at their destination, there *was* the chaos of getting everything loaded into carriages, and they *did* trot up to the Duke’s estate at an ungodly hour. It was impossible to see properly in the dark, but judging from the candles in the windows, the place was fooking *enormous*.

Tomorrow would be soon enough to find out, he supposed.

They were met by a butler who put Felicity’s man to shame in the areas of pompousness and stick-up-the-arse-ity. With the unlikely name of Bobo, he was only a few years older than Griffin, but acted as if he were the king of the castle.

“Welcome home, Mr. Armstrong,” Bobo intoned, with a solemn bow. “And Mr. and Mrs. Calderbank, welcome. His Grace is looking forward to greeting you tomorrow.”

Well, thank fook they wouldn't have to go through that tonight.

"Thank you, Bobo." Ian looked as tired as Griffin felt. "And where is His Grace?"

"Already retired, sir."

Ian nodded, then yawned. "Oh, forgive me. I will join him." He winced. "I mean, I will also retire. I am certain Bobo and Mrs. Bobo—the housekeeper—will ensure you are all shown to your chambers?"

"Certainly, Mr. Armstrong," intoned Bobo with another bow.

"Then I will bid you goodnight." Ian nodded to each of them in turn. "Tomorrow you will meet the Duke, and I suggest you do your best to impress him. Remember, we—*he* values family, so no arguments or drama, if you want to impress him."

Felicity slipped her hand into Marcia's. "Of course, Ian. We can only be ourselves."

The secretary smiled. "I'm certain that will be enough, Flick."

As Ian hurried up the grand staircase, the butler gestured for the rest of them to follow. "This way. My wife has assigned your chambers near one another in the west wing."

There were bloody *wings* to this place?

Shaking his head, Griffin followed Felicity—who was still holding Marcia's hand—up the stairs.

The next hour was spent getting the children settled into their chambers, which was made difficult by the constant exclamations of *Come try this mattress! It's like a cloud!* and *I have my own library?* and *What happens if I pull this cord—whoops!*

Griffin could admit, in the privacy of his own mind, that even he was impressed by how luxurious the Peasgoode place was. He knew Marcia and Rupert were excited because they

were hoping to charm the Duke into making their father his heir, then they'd be able to live like this forever.

But this opulence caused Griffin's stomach to sour. Because he knew the owner was a traitor to the Crown, and it was up to Griffin to expose him.

Then the Calderbanks would be unceremoniously kicked out.

Unless we're ceremoniously kicked out. That sounds more interesting, at least. Pomp and fanfare and trumpets before the auld boot-to-the-arse routine.

His lips twitched.

Good God, he *was* exhausted.

The chambers he and Felicity had been assigned were just outrageous; large and extravagant and most importantly, more than one. It was a set of rooms, connected in the middle by a large changing room and an actual private bathing room.

Griffin tried not to show how impressed he was.

Felicity, of course, acted as if this was all commonplace. Maybe it was, to her. He'd learned from Bull that her father had been a baron, and now her brother held the title. Perhaps she'd grown up with such luxury.

Or perhaps she's just verra, verra good at pretending.

Lord knew she'd fooled Peasgoode's secretary into believing they were happily married.

As her maid Made helped her remove her boots, Felicity sent him a coy look. Nay, it was more than *coy*; it was anticipatory.

The memory of that kiss in the train compartment, and what he'd promised, fired his blood.

Suddenly, he wasn't quite as fatigued as he'd thought.

Bobo the butler *had* assigned Griffin a valet; at least, that's what the young man announced pompously as he'd arrived. Now the annoying fooker had already hung up Griffin's coat and was chattering on about styles and haircuts and how he

wanted to shave Griffin's beard into a set of muttonchops and a mustache.

Over my dead body.

"Get out of here," he growled, waving the man toward the door. "I can undress myself. *And* dress myself tomorrow, so dinnae come back."

The valet sniffed haughtily, and marched stiffly to the door.

Griffin turned to Felicity's maid, Made. "Ye go with him."

He'd tried to use a gentler tone, and considering she didn't scream or burst into tears, it must've worked. The young woman slowly rose to her feet and glanced at her mistress.

"Go on, Made." Felicity met his eyes. "I will manage without you this evening."

"Get out of here," he commanded, his voice gruff. "I'll undress yer mistress."

He hadn't meant it to sound quite so...*sordid*. But when Made giggled, curtsayed, and giggled again, he realized he'd failed.

Still giggling, and somehow curtsying, the maid hustled to the door.

To his surprise, Felicity followed her, ensuring the lock engaged. The *click* sounded unnaturally loud. She pressed her forehead to the seam for a moment, and he saw her shoulders relax as she exhaled.

And suddenly, Griffin realized everything she'd gone through in the last few days. Not just pretending to be his wife, not just the lies...but she'd taken charge of a *family*, of their journey. She'd spent a full day in the train, keeping watch over them all, listening to Rupert's dissertation on the width of railroad tracks, returning Marcia's enthusiasm for the adventure, keeping Bull out of trouble...

And Griffin had let her.

It had felt so *natural*, for her to take on this role, that it hadn't once occurred to him that she wasn't actually Marcia and Rupert's mother; she didn't *actually* have any obligation to care for any of them.

Fook. Now he owed her even more.

At his side, his hands were curling into fists, then uncurling again. It was an ancient habit, born of frustration and an inability to *do* something.

Well, he could damn well do something now. He could do what he'd promised. He could *teach* her.

And he would bloody well enjoy it.

Griffin kicked off his boots and yanked at his necktie. He was unbuttoning his waistcoat when Felicity turned.

"I have a proposition."

He froze, mid-unbuttoning. "I thought ye already propositioned me. I agreed, remember?"

Her grin was faint. "I have *another* proposition."

His fingers resumed their journey. "Proposition away, Flick." After all, he'd agreed readily enough to the first one.

"Outside these doors..." She took a deep breath, stepping closer to him. "Outside these chambers, we are—we are here for a reason. We lie, we sneak, we do whatever needs to be done."

His waistcoat dangled from his shoulders. "Aye. But inside these chambers?"

Her gaze was locked on the skin at the base of his throat. Griffin swore he could *feel* the heat. And when her tongue darted between her lips—he doubted she was even aware of the movement—his cock jumped to life.

Felicity was looking at him like a starving woman looked at a buffet of cheese.

"Inside these doors," she whispered, "we are just Felicity and Griffin. A man and a woman."

“Ye’re saying ye want nae lies between us, here?”

As she pulled her spectacles from her nose and placed them on one of the many small tables scattered around, she whispered, “Please.”

Please.

Aye, this is what she wanted, she’d made that very clear.

“Turn around,” he commanded.

The buttons on her gown went all down her back, and Griffin could’ve made short work of them. But instead he took his time, enjoying the way the skin on the back of her neck formed little bumps each time he exhaled across it. Her breathing was irregular too, and he guessed it was because of anticipation.

Just like his.

When the buttons were finally done, he pushed the gown forward, off her shoulders, trapping her arms in the sleeves. Since she couldn’t see him, he felt justified into smiling as he dragged one finger down her spine and hooked it under her chemise.

She shivered.

His cock strained at his trousers and his voice was rougher than he expected when he commanded, “Step out of yer gown.”

It was a flurry of movement, but then Felicity was still once more, her back straight and determined before him. His hands went to her shoulders, and when she shivered again, he dragged them down her bare arms. He lowered his lips to the spot where her chemise straps crossed her skin, and kissed her through the silk.

The noise she made could’ve come from one of her cats.

Griffin’s hands curled around her wrists, and he lifted them to place her palms against her corset, atop her own tits. Fook, the instinct to cover her hands, to *squeeze*, was hard to ignore, but patience was a virtue here.

When he pressed against her, his cock nestled into the cleft of her arse, and she moaned and pushed back. Let him know she wanted this as much as he did.

With her hands out of the way, his fingers flew down the front of her corset, unhooking slowly. Then he flattened his palms on either side and squeezed, popping each latch in one movement, pulling it from her.

Now all that stood between his touch and her skin was the chemise.

And from the small movements she was making, and the tiny moans in between her gasps, she was more than ready.

But he was determined to go slow, to *teach her*.

That was what she'd asked for, hadn't she?

So Griffin lifted his hands to her coiffure. Jesus Christ, he'd wanted this from the moment he'd first seen her. Wanted to run his fingers through her red curls. Wanted to feel them draped across *his* skin.

He plucked the pins from her hair one by one, and because he knew the cost of such things, placed them all safely in his trouser pocket before pulling down her braid and unwrapping it. Each movement was slow and deliberate, defiance of what he *wanted* to be doing.

But when he dug his fingers into her scalp, a sort of a massage which claimed her as *his*, she moaned and dropped her head back onto his shoulder.

Seeing those red curls cascading across her skin made Griffin mad with need. With a growl, he reached around her again, flattening one palm against her stomach and pulling her flush against him, as his other hand worked the ties of her chemise. It'd be easier to pull the damn thing over her head, but not when he had her like this—

Then they were loose, and the thing drooped down—held up only by their bodies pressing against one another—and her tits were free.

With her tipped back against him, he was able to peer down over her shoulder, able to watch his hands rise and cup her glorious mounds.

They were pale against his skin, and the scars on the backs of his hands stood out even more. But her nipples—the same delicious shade as her lips—puckered at his touch, and he groaned as he hefted each breast.

They were larger than he'd expected, the weight fitting better in his hold than he'd guessed. He hadn't thought his cock could get any harder.

He'd been wrong.

“Griffin,” Felicity whimpered, and his knees buckled.

When he pulled away from her, her chemise pooled around her ankles. He turned her about to face him, even as he sank to one knee in front of her.

She was almost nude, and he wasted no time in untying her bloomers and allowing them to drop as well.

Then his mouth found her stomach, his lips tracing a line from her navel to the spot between her breasts, while his hands...his hands went *everywhere*.

Griffin felt her shudder as his calluses scraped her arse, then slid up her sides to cup her tits once more. His mouth found one nipple, and she gasped his name again.

He was worshipping her. Worshipping her with his hands and his mouth, there was no other word for it.

Felicity's stockings were still gartered neatly above her knees, but he couldn't seem to drag his attention away from her tits to do a damned thing about them. Instead she stood in a pile of her discarded clothing, and her hands dropped to his shoulders.

A benediction.

Each touch of hers—even through his clothing—was a brand. Heat, desire—it was almost painful. He *ached* to feel her fingers on his skin.

He needed her.

Aye, and he would have her.

With a mighty effort, Griffin forced himself to sit back on his heels, to tip his head back, to meet her gaze. Her eyes were hazy with desire, and he resisted the urge to grin proudly. He'd done that!

He'd do much more.

So he lifted his hands to the buttons of his shirt, and began to undo them. When she recognized his actions, her nostrils flared with excitement, and her tongue darted across her lower lip.

As if she could already taste him, the way he'd tasted her.

Soon.

“Get on the bed,” Griffin growled.

And Felicity hurried to obey him.

CHAPTER 12

FELICITY'S HEART was pounding loudly enough she thought she could hear it, which she was fairly certain was a medical impossibility. Or a sign of an emergency.

Yes, an emergency! Get on the bed!

She all but fell across the counterpane, then flipped over on her back to watch him undress. He yanked his shirt from his torso, then bent to slide his trousers and smalls off...and when he straightened, she sucked in a breath.

Here in the Highlands, even in the summer, the nights were chilly. There was a small fire set in the old-fashioned hearth and—even with a few old-fashioned candelabra scattered throughout the room, so no one would have to bother with the small chandelier hanging over the bed—the flames offered a delicious sort of illumination.

Surely it was only their flickering, teasing light which made Griffin look like one of the old gods come to life?

His face was shadowed as he stalked toward the bed, but she could see the scars on his torso—three small pockmarks on his left side and shoulder, something long and wicked which curled down his hip, numerous small white marks. They should've frightened her, but instead the sight of them made her...*hungry*.

Her gaze dropped to his penis, erect and proud, jutting from a nest of dark curls. She realized she was salivating. How strange.

Look, all that was required was for Griffin to remove his clothing, and suddenly you are getting all sorts of scientific data!

Perhaps in response to her gaze his member seemed to jump, to push forward even more intently. How would it feel, inside her? When she pressed her thighs together, Felicity could already feel the dampness of her desire, and while her previous mating experiences hadn't been entirely satisfactory, it was anticipation, not fear, which made her breathing faster.

Another worrying medical anomaly.

She made a mental note to investigate that, and then promptly forgot about said mental note when his hands closed around her ankles and he *pulled* her toward the edge of the bed.

There might've been a small squeal, but Felicity hoped it had been a mere gasp.

“Are ye ready to learn, sweetheart?”

At his growl, her gaze dropped to his cock, then flicked back up to his eyes.

“Answer me,” Griffin commanded. “Ye want this?”

“Yes,” she breathed, eyes wide.

“What do ye want?”

“I want you to teach me about pleasure. I want to understand this connection we have.”

Without answer, Griffin ran his palms up her calves to her knees, then back again. It was a simple touch, but through the silk of her stockings, she could feel his heat. The muscles in her legs quivered from the effort of staying still.

Then his hands were on her knees again, and he was lifting them, separating them. He placed her feet flat on the bed, knees bent...and he leaned over to kiss the inside of one thigh.

This time she definitely squealed, then tried to squash his head between her knees.

Instead of becoming irritated, Griffin merely placed a hand on each leg and pushed them open again. His breath on her damp skin caused her muscles to tighten, and when he kissed her again, this time closer to the junction of her legs, Felicity squeezed her eyes shut and tried to tell herself not to be frightened.

He wasn't going to hurt her.

She'd *asked* for this.

His lips skimmed across her skin again, and then he *licked* the spot where her leg met her—her *her* and she didn't think she could get any more tense.

Then his palm came down on her pelvis, and the weight pressed her rear end into the mattress. She hadn't realized how she'd arched away from it until then.

It was hard to tell, but it felt as if he'd smiled. "Breathe, Flick. It'll be a'right."

Would it?

Yes. You trust him.

That was true, she *did* trust him, which was an interesting discovery she'd have to examine later.

For now, though, she forced herself to inhale, then exhale. As she exhaled, she felt the worry seeping from her as well. And as that sensation left her body, others crept in.

She could feel his breath against her most intimate folds; could feel her own pulse under his palm still on her hip.

The base of his hand was cupping her mound, and it felt... Goodness, it was difficult to describe, sort of a *protection*? A cradling?

Oh, do stop trying to describe the sensations and just enjoy them.

Yes. Yes, a rather good idea, all things considered. She'd just *enjoy* the sensations and then later examine them—

His mouth found her labia, and all coherent thought vanished.

A sound—a cross between a mewl and a moan—seemed to be echoing in her ears, and it took a moment to realize it was coming from *her* throat. Griffin licked and teased and at one point even drew her skin between his lips and tugged, and all the while his fingers were stroking and dipping in and out of her opening.

Good heavens.

Good heavens.

She'd had sex. She'd *given birth*. In the previous decade, she'd learned about self-pleasure and masturbation, and even experimented with various small insertions.

But this...

This...

Good heavens, this was *nothing* like her fingers.

Eventually Felicity quit making noise because she had to inhale, but she continued to squirm under his ministrations as her fingers curled around the counterpane, as if to keep from taking flight. Her behind was off the mattress once more, straining upward to match the pleasure he was showing her.

Yes, *pleasure*.

This was what she'd been searching for, these answers. She'd known Griffin would be the one to explain this to her, and now—

And now—

She could feel her orgasm building behind the pressure he applied to her clitoris. She *needed* that—needed him...

And then his mouth moved, his lips finding that bud, and he flicked his tongue over it once, twice...and her pleasure exploded.

“Oh God!” Her cry was garbled as she thrust her hips off the bed, pushing her mound close to him. His fingers were inside her, and she felt her inner muscles contracting around them, even as she panted from the fierce sensations coursing through her veins.

In the midst of it all, she *swore* she felt him chuckle.

But no, that couldn't be right. This grumpy pretend husband of hers, *laughing*?

And then his fingers slid from her. Her hips swiveled, a strange feeling of *unfulfillment* seeping from her, a desperation, despite the gentle hum in her veins.

The bed dipped as Griffin crawled up her body until his hands were placed on either side of her shoulders, and instinctively she reached around his waist to bring him closer. His chest pressed against hers—the scars tight centers of harshness as they brushed against her nipples—and she urged him even closer.

“Please, Griffin.” She wasn't above begging. “I need...”

Felicity didn't know what she needed. Why was what he'd shown her not enough?

He held her gaze. “Do ye want more, sweetheart?”

“Yes,” she gasped. “*Yes.*”

Then his hand was between them, grasping his stiff penis, and he nestled it against the center of her opening. “This, Felicity? Ye want my cock deep in ye? Ye want me to show ye how it *feels* to be—”

To be loved.

He didn't say it. She didn't say it. But her hold tightened on him. “Please, Griffin,” she repeated in another whisper. “I need you.”

And he slid into her.

Thank goodness he'd eased the way with his earlier ministrations, because this was—this was—

This was bloody well uncomfortable.

Felicity had stiffened at his entrance, the memory of Exingham's long-ago invasion causing her to freeze. But Griffin was even bigger, even wider.

She'd given birth, yes, but that was sixteen years before. This was...

Well, it didn't *hurt*. It was just...stretched. She was *stretched*.

Unlike Exingham, Griffin seemed to understand. When she'd frozen, he ceased movement as well. He was poised over her, breathing heavily, one hand trapped between them, staring down at her.

But as her fingernails dug into his hips, she had the impression he wasn't angry. Just...waiting.

He was waiting for her to adjust.

That, more than anything else—more, even, than the pleasure she'd just experienced—allowed Felicity to relax. She exhaled, and as she did, felt her muscles unclench. Not just in her shoulders, but her inner muscles, the ones tight from his entrance.

And as she did, she could suddenly feel *him* so much more.

“Better, sweetheart?” Griffin murmured.

Sweetheart. He'd called her that before. And the expression in his eyes...concern? He wanted her to be better.

So she said merely, “Yes,” and she meant it. She *was* better, because he wasn't Exingham. Behind his gruff exterior, he cared.

About *her*.

Griffin leaned down, the muscles in his arm flexing as he supported himself, and kissed her. It was the first time all evening he'd kissed her, kissed her properly.

Breasts and labia do not count?

Those had been wonderful kisses as well, but this one was soft and gentle, his tongue dipping playfully, reminding her what he'd done for her. What he'd *taught* her. She could taste herself on his lips, and the realization shouldn't have been arousing, but it was.

He teased her with his mouth, and as he did, her desire grew again. It had never really left, the gentle afterglow just paused by his cock's entrance. And now, as Griffin kissed her, and she kissed him in return, the gentle pulse in her veins turned to a steady hum.

Then a throb.

Then a desperation.

Her hips pressed upward, the tiniest amount, a fraction of an inch. But the sensation caused Felicity to gasp against his lips, and she swore she felt them curl in response.

“Again, sweetheart.”

Well, who was she to deny such a command, especially on a fact-finding mission? She nudged her hips forward again, then back, pulling her weeping core over his engorged shaft.

Weeping core? Engorged shaft?

She was beginning to sound like *A Harlot's Guide*.

Well, what had he called it? Oh yes, his *cock*.

Again, and then again. In minute movements, she slid across his hardness, each motion sending countless explosions across her skin. Across her *brain*. How did it do that?

“Sweetheart,” he groaned against her jaw. “Are ye ready for me to move?”

Her palms spread across his back. “Yes, Griffin. I think it has become rather vital.”

So he did.

He moved.

Good Lord in Heaven, he *moved*.

He started slow, each thrust steady and gentle, deliberately withdrawing almost completely, allowing her to feel each glorious inch of him. How big *was* he? She really should measure.

Later.

Yes, later.

And the pressure began to build again inside her, and soon she was lifting her hips off the bed to meet him, meeting him thrust-for-thrust. His plunges became deeper, harder...more desperate.

She was climbing higher, higher, pleasure throbbing through her limbs, the muscles in her feet cramping from how hard she arched against him.

With each plunge now, Griffin released a breath, the noise somewhere between a grunt and a groan, and she wondered if he was as close as she was.

She needed...

She wanted...

Oh God Oh God Oh God Oh God!

Between them his hand shifted, his thumb and forefinger finding her clitoris, and he squeezed.

Her orgasm burst over her, and she screamed.

She thought she *might* have screamed his name, but it was definitely a scream.

He caught her mouth in his as her pleasure coursed, wave after wave, through her, causing her to buck wildly against him.

It was wonderful.

It was miraculous.

Scientifically, it was a little difficult to believe, but Felicity vowed to examine these sensations. In great detail. Repeatedly.

Her inner muscles were tight around his—his *cock*, but she could still feel him sliding in and out of her, the sort of desperate movement which pierced her haze. As her pleasure began to dull to a vague hum, he stiffened against her.

She felt his cock flex, then flex again, and then he was muttering, "*Fook fook fook*," as he pulled from her and spilled his seed across her curls.

The way his slick member rubbed against her clitoris as the thick white strings spat from the tip of his cock...she'd lifted her head to watch, and rather than feeling sordid, the sensation was arousing. Experimentally, she flexed her hips again, dragging her sensitive nub against his hardness.

His gaze shot up to meet hers.

And she smiled.

Griffin's eyes widened, and then, miracle of miracles, he smiled in return.

A genuine smile.

She wouldn't have believed it possible if she hadn't seen it, and *felt* it, nestled against her soul. Her smile grew, then grew again, and then, somehow, for some reason, she was laughing.

He merely shook his head in response. "No' certain that's flattering, sweetheart."

Which of course caused her to laugh harder, although she couldn't pinpoint why.

Blowing out a breath—did he sound resigned, or irritated?—Griffin wrapped one arm around her and rolled to one side, taking her with him.

Between one moment and the next, she'd gone from a strange, desperate sort of hysteria, to being calm and comforted in the circle of his arms.

Oh.

As her heartbeat slowed, and her breathing evened out to match his, she realized her cheek was pressed against his chest. She could hear his heart beating, loud and strong. It was soothing, in a strange way, like a clock ticking the seconds past.

Those seconds stretched into minutes, and then longer. She felt him soften, and the part which had joined them grew sticky. But still he held her, and she felt...*safe*. Safe and cherished, almost.

After a long while, she felt brave enough to whisper his name, since she wasn't looking at him.

He, of course, grunted in response.

She licked her lips, then tried again. "Griffin?"

Her head was tucked beneath his chin, so she felt as much as heard when he muttered, "What?"

She had to smile. "Thank you."

Thank you for teaching me. Thank you for showing me that wonder.

But she didn't say either thing, and just had to hope he understood.

Perhaps he did, because he grunted again, and his hold on her tightened for a moment.

On the other hand, she'd noticed his grunt could mean anything from *I am displeased* to *I have no opinion* to *How did Bull get my wallet?* so it really wasn't saying much.

But she wanted to assume it meant he was pleased.

Felicity exhaled and snuggled closer, feeling the exhaustion returning. For a while, sheer wonder had kept it at bay, but it had been a long day and no matter how busy her mind was, her body desperately needed sleep.

But her eyes popped open when she felt him tense, the moment before a knock came at the door.

"Flick?" her son called from the other side of the portal, laughter in his tone. "Are ye well? I thought I heard ye scream."

"I'm going to kill him," muttered Griffin, as he tossed a blanket over her body and rolled away.

And for a moment, Felicity agreed. Bull's tone suggested he could guess *why* his mother had screamed, and was teasing her. Perhaps the lad would have benefited from a discussion on privacy and why it was vital to never discuss one's own sex life with one's children.

“I am fine,” she called out, as Griffin struggled into his trousers, anger obvious in each motion. “Truly. Why are you not asleep?”

Bull didn't have a chance to answer before Griffin yanked the door open with a growl. Felicity gasped and yanked the blankets up higher, but Bull's attention was on Griffin. His smile faded to a worried look.

“Why are ye poking about? Ye should be locked in yer room!”

Her son's expression turned mulish. “I thought it would be helpful to get the lay of the land. Ye ken, investigate where Peasgoode's study is, that sort of thing.”

“And no doubt steal a few baubles?” Griffin's frustration was obvious as he turned away, dragging his hand through his hair.

As he reached for his shirt, Bull turned an imploring look on Felicity, but she shook her head. “You should not have courted danger, Bull,” she admonished quietly, hoping the dim lighting hid her blush.

Griffin finished yanking on his shirt. “Come on, laddie. I'm walking ye back to yer room.”

“Och, aye?” Her son's chin jerked up defiantly. “And when I'm locked in safely, ye'll come back here and tup my mother again?”

Felicity sucked in a breath as Griffin lunged for the lad, but pulled himself back at the last moment.

She saw his hands opening and closing into fists and her mind whirled, trying to find some way to diffuse the situation.

This was not what she had expected—but then, her experiment *had* been rather...vocal.

To her surprise, Bull did it, his shoulders slumping. “I'm sorry. I shouldnae have said that.”

“Ye're fooking right, ye shouldnae. She's yer *mother*, lad. Ye owe her more respect than that.”

Both Felicity's and Bull's eyes went wide at Griffin's defense of her. Her son opened his mouth, but Griffin forestalled him with a sharp cutting gesture.

"It's nae concern of yers what yer mother—or *I*—do behind these doors. But there's a second bedroom through there"—he nodded pointedly through the connecting door—"and that's where I'll be sleeping."

He planned to sleep apart from her?

Bull's gray gaze darted to her, but Felicity closed her eyes so he wouldn't see the sorrow in hers.

She heard the door close as Griffin escorted her mischief-making son back to his room, and she reached for the pillow, cradling it against her chest.

It smelled of him.

Shaving soap and sweat and something that was just *Griffin*.

It should be impossible for a human to identify another human by their scents; human noses weren't as developed as a dog's or a wild animal. Rupert had been quite clear on that during his monologue on the importance that he be permitted a dog when he became a duke's son. It was impossible to know who had touched the pillow, but here and now, she would've known Griffin's scent anywhere.

And the only place she had it was here, on her skin, on this pillow.

She buried her face in it and tried not to cry.

The fire wasn't enough to keep her warm, not any longer.

And when she heard the opening and closing of the door to the adjoining room, she knew he'd kept his vow to Bull, and was sleeping apart from her.

You have slept alone every night of your life. Why is this problematic?

She didn't know.

She didn't know why *any* of this caused her chest to ache and her eyes to hurt.

What they'd shared had merely been a bargain, him giving her something in exchange for her cooperation with his mission. Right?

With a sigh, Felicity rose and cleaned herself as best she could, then climbed back into the large, cold bed. She pulled the pillow closer and inhaled, trying to trap the memory of that scent.

Her brain was a tangled mess, her emotions even more so. It was a blessing to fall into a deep, dreamless sleep.

CHAPTER 13

HE HAD her fingernail marks on his shoulders.

Griffin had discovered them that morning as he was dressing, and the sight made him grin. But then he remembered how he'd taken an excuse to leave Felicity's room—leave her arms—and his good cheer faded.

Aye, he'd emptied his ballocks. Aye, he'd experienced pleasure unlike any he could remember. Aye, he'd assuaged her curiosity and made her come more than once.

And then he'd left her.

Christ, he could still taste her on his tongue.

Just the thought of that miracle—and the look of wonder on her face—had his cock stiffening again. Grumbling to himself, Griffin readjusted his trousers and steeled himself to see her again.

As it was, they ran into each other—literally—in the hall.

He'd taken the exit from his chamber to the corridor, and he happened to be walking past as Felicity stepped out of hers. Instinctively, Griffin reached out to steady her, and when she turned to find herself nearly in his arms, her face lit up.

It should've been embarrassing or awkward. Instead, she lit the fook up like a firework, and Griffin felt lower than a worm.

“Good morning,” Felicity announced cheerfully. “Have you breakfasted?”

It was a struggle to keep his tone even. "I'm on my way." Then, since it seemed they were going the same place, he offered his arm. "Do ye think the Duke will join us?"

When she slid her arm into his, he felt those damned sparks again. "I hope so. The anticipation is killing me."

He grunted in agreement.

To his surprise, Felicity chuckled. When he glanced down at her, her smile turned rueful and she patted his arm. "No, please, do not overwhelm me with your insights, Griffin."

She was *teasing* him? A reluctant smile tugged at his lips.

This time, the noise she made was suspiciously like a grunt, and he was certain she'd done it on purpose.

He was in a better mood when they arrived in the breakfast room.

"Good morning, Papa!"

Releasing Felicity, he stepped toward Marcia to receive his daughter's kiss. "Good morning, Marcia. I see ye've forgotten to wear a gown again today, and somehow acquired a jacket and waistcoat."

"What?" She did a credible job of looking surprised as she glanced down at herself. "Well, hell, Papa, look at that! Those are trousers! You can see where my legs bend in the middle!"

Felicity was helping Rupert with his plate, and cleared her throat. "Marcia, L-A-N-G-A-G-E, remember." Her eyes cut frantically to the lad and back. "Young ears, and all that."

"Yes," Rupert agreed solemnly, "you can't afford to let me know you have knees."

Marcia was still pretending shock. "Knees? I have *knees*?"

"Everyone has them, Marsh," Bull announced as he entered the room. "We just dinnae need to *see* yers. Good morning, Flick." He blew his mother a kiss, then winked. "Feeling invigorated this morning, are ye?"

Now Felicity blushed. This morning, when she'd taken Griffin's arm, she hadn't blushed, hadn't seemed to feel

awkward, but this scamp made her feel embarrassed?

Growling, Griffin turned a threatening glare toward Bull.

The lad lifted his hands in mock surrender. “Sorry, Flick, didnae mean to tease. Marsh, yer knees are lovely, or so I assume, but of course I cannae see them. No’ that I have any interest in seeing them.”

Rupert was examining his sausage, and without looking up, said, “I’d stop while you were ahead, if I were you.”

“If ye were me, laddie, we’d be good-looking *and* brilliant, which would be an unfair advantage to the rest of the world.”

“Yes, and you’d have four knees.” Marcia was grinning as she served herself. “Do you think these are neeps? I just learned about them. Apparently they’re a kind of fish?”

“Neeps are turnips,” Rupert said blandly. “The thing you’re eating is a completely normal sausage.”

His sister speared it with a fork, held it up, and squinted at her newly acquired meat-tube. “Hmm. I suppose I shall have to trust you.”

Rupert delicately attacked his egg. “Imagine my relief.”

Over their heads, Felicity’s gaze met his. Griffin was surprised to see a twinkle of amusement in her green eyes. “Oh dear, what *are* we going to do with them?”

“Well, I dinnae ken about ye, but I’m considering leaving them out for the wolves.”

Felicity pretended disappointment. “Well, as a D-U-T-I-F-U-L-L wife, I shall have to defer to you.”

“*Flick*,” Marcia drawled with a roll of her eyes, “you don’t have to spell out *dutiful*.”

“Unless she thought she was *full of doody*,” Rupert deadpanned.

His siblings cracked up.

Siblings? Nay, he only has a sister. Bull is not his brother. Try to remember that.

Griffin wasn't completely surprised that neither the Duke nor Ian joined them for breakfast. What *did* surprise him was that there weren't any other guests dining with them.

Either Peasgoode's other guests didn't break their fasts in public, or there *were* no other guests. Thorne had said the estate was remote and the Duke reclusive; did he not make a habit of entertaining?

Ian had indicated he'd interviewed other applicants to be the Duke's heir, and none of them had quite measured up to Peasgoode's metric. Was it possible none of them had been invited to the Highlands to meet the Duke?

All of that suited Griffin just fine.

Their meal was enjoyable and a bit raucous, so maybe it was for the best that they were alone. Even Griffin found himself enjoying the children's banter, and Felicity's adorable attempts at maintaining propriety. Fruitless attempts.

When they were finished breakfasting, the butler magically appeared in the doorway. "The Duke invites you to meet with him in the Blue Room," Bobo intoned.

"Och, that must be fancy," Bull mock whispered. "Ye can *hear* the capital letters."

As they filed out, Griffin found a beaming Mrs. Mac waiting for them. He raised a brow. "Are ye joining us, then?"

"Weeeeelllll..." She wagged her palm back and forth, as if deciding. "I *was* going to tootle over to the falconry, but I suppose I could take a few minutes to meet a Duke first, eh?"

Griffin didn't roll his eyes, but it was close. Instead, he bowed regally, indicating she should precede him and she did, with a flounce.

There was no one in the room.

Bull whistled as they spread out. "See what I mean? Capital-letters-worthy."

"*Try* not to steal anything," Marcia murmured.

Felicity cleared her throat. "Bull does not steal things."

It was a Mother tone of voice, a tone which brooked no argument. Bull made the sign of the Cross and clasped his hands in front of him as if praying.

This time Griffin *did* roll his eyes, and turned away, so the lad wouldn't see his smile. It was in time to watch Mrs. Mac bend over double, her arm almost shoulder-deep in an apron pocket six inches to a side.

“This ought to help, young man, eh?” she declared proudly, as—with a manner of a magician pulling a donkey from a hat—she presented him with a set of knitting needles and a skein of blue yarn.

“Brilliant, Mrs. Mac!” Bull declared, scooping them from her and placing a kiss on her cheek. “This will most definitely keep me from rifling through the Duke's heirloom silver cabinet.”

The words were so clearly dripping in sarcasm they might as well have been dipped in it, and Griffin wasn't the only one who snorted disbelievingly.

The door on the other side of the room entered, and two men stepped through.

Rather, one man stepped, one man rolled. Ian Armstrong—tall and lithe—was pushing a bath chair, in which sat a short, elderly, slightly plump man. His lap was covered with a blanket woven in the MacIver plaid, and behind his spectacles his eyes glittered brightly.

The Duke of Peasgoode looked like someone's benevolent grandfather.

Griffin slowly rose to his feet, and the rest of his counterfeit family followed.

“Your Grace,” he greeted stiffly, bowing.

“This is them, Ian?” The Duke's voice didn't sound as weak as his body. Instead, he sounded excited, as he shared a knowing smile with his secretary. “Please, please, introduce us!”

Ian smiled as he placed his hand gently on the Duke's shoulder. "His Grace, the Duke of Peasgoode, Lord Duncan MacIver. May I present the Calderbanks?"

As the introductions were made, and Griffin's family bowed or curtsied in order—Griffin noted vaguely that Marcia's curtsying ability really was remarkable, considering she wore a pair of trousers—he studied the Duke.

As he noted the secret, excited smile the elderly man sent his secretary, Griffin suddenly had a fairly good idea why the Duke of Peasgoode had never married and begat direct heirs.

"And this, Your Grace, is Mrs. MacLovinSquashDoodle, the Calderbank's next-door neighbor."

For the first time during the introductions, the Duke paused, his enthusiasm dampened. "The...next-door neighbor?"

"Indeed." Ian was smiling. "I have no idea why she's here, but she has the most remarkable pockets."

"Lucky her," muttered Marcia.

Mrs. Mac bobbed cheerfully. "Oh, I never let the children out of my sight, Your Grace. Once, when Rupert was a wee babe, we were out for a walk in the park, and a footpad tried to have his way with me, and I shoved Rupert into my apron and scurried home, eh? I travel everywhere with them."

The Duke seemed nonplussed by this anecdote. "The...neighbor," he repeated, as if trying to understand.

"Mrs. Mac, do you currently have any children in your apron pockets?" asked Ian, a hint of laughter in his tone.

"I dunno. I can check if you'd like, eh?"

When the Duke began to chuckle, Mrs. Mac winked and bobbed another curtsy. "Well, I can see you gentlemen would like to spend time with your new family, so I'll be off. Have to see a man about a falcon."

As she bustled out, Ian repeated, "Falcons?" under his breath.

Rupert spoke up. “Falconry is a time-honored and noble sport, much patronized by medieval lords in order to—contrary to the belief it kept food on the table—show off how wealthy they were. It has continued through the ages—the Tudors, Georgian, the Regency, and now into the Victorian era—as an excuse to ride out with expensive living toys.”

Stunned silence followed, as it often did one of Rupert’s spontaneous lectures.

Then Bull, knitting needles clicking, murmured, “Victorian error?”

“The reign of Queen Victoria,” Marcia clarified. “As opposed to the olden days.”

“So we’re no’ living in the olden days now? Now it’s the Victorian whatsis?”

Marcia snorted. “*Try to keep up, Bull!*”

The Duke cleared his throat. “We have pigeons.” When everyone turned his way, he shrugged. “Peasgoode doesnae have a falconry. Perhaps she’s found the pigeons in the old kirk ruins?”

Felicity’s smile seemed a bit stunned. “Yes,” she declared brightly. “That was likely what she meant. Pigeons!”

“So easy to confuse the two,” murmured Ian.

By then he’d pushed the Duke into the center of the room, and the elderly man gestured toward the chairs and sofas. “Sit, sit, everyone!” He held out his hand to Griffin. “But first...”

When Griffin shook the Duke’s hand, he was surprised to find his grip still strong. And there was genuine delight in the old man’s twinkling blue eyes.

“I am *verra* pleased to meet ye, Griffin,” the Duke declared. “Or should I call ye *cousin*?”

He was still holding Griffin’s hand, and the younger man shifted uncomfortably, then cleared his throat. “Griffin is fine, Yer Grace. I’m a simple man.”

Another warm squeeze. “Then ye must call me Duncan.” The Duke raised his voice so everyone could hear him. “Ye must *all* call me Duncan, please. After all, we are family!”

As the children’s expressions lit with delight, Griffin gently extracted his hand. “We thank ye for the honor, Yer—*Duncan*. But it wouldnae be proper for the children to call ye —”

The older man waved his words away. “How about *Uncle Duncan*? Would that be acceptable?”

Before Griffin could respond, the children’s enthusiasm drowned him out. Even Felicity was smiling indulgently. “I think that would be quite wonderful, Duncan.”

It was the right thing to say, judging by the Duke’s satisfied nod. Damnation, but Felicity was good at this; good at understanding what needed to be done and said. She was far better with social settings than Griffin himself was.

Perhaps it was because he’d been thinking about her, but when he found his seat, he was surprised to find himself tucked up beside Felicity on the sofa. Surprised because he’d *intended* to stand over by the hearth, where he could watch the proceedings with care, not be distracted by her warmth and sweet scent.

When she shot him a small, secret smile, Griffin threw his arms around her shoulders and dragged her up against him. He hadn’t intended to do *that* either, but he was helpless when it came to her, apparently.

As Felicity placed her hand on his knee in what must’ve looked like a loving gesture, Duncan beamed at them.

He’s a traitor to the Crown. Try to remember that. He might look like a delighted auld man, but he’s helping the man who killed yer first wife.

Damn. Nay, Mary wasn’t his *first wife*. She was his *only* wife.

The woman whose thumb was currently drawing small circles on his knee—he doubted she was even aware of it—wasn’t actually *his*.

She—he—*This whole situation* was just one big phony scheme.

But the Duke of Peasgoode was beaming at them, which meant *it had worked*.

“Griffin, lad, I notice ye’re no’ wearing yer clan colors.” The Duke proudly patted the blanket across his lap. “I ken no’ everyone is keen on their knees waving about in the breeze, but ye’re in the Highlands now! Ye *must* show yer clan affiliations!”

Knitting needles clicking, Bull announced with a grin, “Ye hear that, Marsh? Maybe ye ought to wear the MacIver kilt.”

Before his daughter would agree—God help them all—Griffin cleared his throat. “My father was a simple vicar, Yer—*Duncan*. I wasnae raised to claim any particular clan affiliation.”

The older man exchanged an amused glance with his secretary, who had taken a nearby seat, then pulled back the blanket on his lap to reveal his own kilt. “Well, lad...” He reached out a hand to Ian, and the other man took it, helping the Duke slowly to his feet.

Duncan, still holding his secretary’s hand like a lifeline, gestured proudly at his kilt. “Griffin, I would be pleased—nay, *honored* if ye would consider wearing the MacIver colors while ye’re at Peasgoode, or longer.”

Felicity squeezed Griffin’s knee, but he needed no urging on how to politely accept a favor. “Aye, Duncan,” he managed, surprised to find his voice rough with emotion. “I would be honored as well. Thank ye.”

But how could he wear the colors of a traitor?

Marcia was on her feet already. She planted her hands on her hips and cocked her head to one side as she studied the Duke. “That’s a kilt, is it?”

“Aye, young lady.” Duncan seemed amused instead of horrified by her outspoken behavior, thank fook. “Have ye never seen one?”

She flipped the tails of her jacket out of the way and shoved her hands in the pockets of her trousers. “No, not really. I’ve recently decided dresses aren’t for me, you see, and then I show up in Scotland and discover even the *men* wear them?”

“Miss Marcia, this is *not* a dress,” Ian declared with affront.

But Duncan was chuckling, and waved away the insult. “Young Marcia, is it?” He held out his hand, and she took it, a little hesitantly. He pulled her forward. “A Highlander’s kilt is a sacred thing, ye ken.” He pointed out each part as he spoke. “The pleats are exact, and each has meaning. The way it hits the knees in the front and is longer in the back, see? It’s folding and donning is a bit meditative, truth be told.”

“What’s that?” Marcia was pointing at the furry pouch dangling in front of his crotch.

Griffin groaned and dropped his head into his free hand.

Luckily, the Duke merely chuckled. “This is the sporran. I keep my—well, I suppose ye’d call it a pocket, really.”

“You have to wear a *purse*?” Marcia demanded, aghast. “Your kilt doesn’t have pockets?”

“Do yer dresses have pockets?” the Duke shot back, clearly amused at the thought of a sporran being called such an ignoble name.

“No! That’s why I’m wearing trousers!”

Duncan chuckled and released her hand. “Well, lass, kilts dinnae have pockets. We wear the sporran instead.”

She shook her head in disgust. “No thank you, then. I’m not going back to something that requires a *purse*. Bull, ye should wear a kilt. I’ll carry yer things in *my* pockets, for a change.”

Bull’s lips twitched, but he pretended interest in his knitting. Was that a scarf he was making? “I have a kilt already, in Lindsay colors.”

“Yes, but you’re not a Lindsay any longer, *brother*,” Marcia pointed out snidely, as she sprawled onto the chair at his side. “You’re a Calderbank.”

Bull just hummed noncommittedly.

Felicity cleared her throat. “Marcia, dear.” When she had her attention, Felicity tapped one finger on the arm rest of the sofa.

It was apparently the only reminder the girl needed. Huffing a sigh and rolling her eyes, she pulled herself upright, locked her ankles primly, and folded her hands in her lap. Marcia now looked like a perfect lady, despite the whole trousers-and-waistcoat thing.

Chuckling to himself, the Duke leaned on Ian to sit back into his wheeled chair. Once he was situated, his secretary gently placed the blanket over his knobby knees, and then took the Duke’s hand once more.

“Well,” declared Duncan, beaming at all of them. “Ian has told me so much about ye all, but I’m looking forward to getting to ken ye each better. For instance, Griffin, yer father is a vicar?”

“Was, Yer Grace.”

“Och, aye, I remember, he passed on a while ago.”

“Ten years ago.” Griffin couldn’t help the curtness in his tone.

But the Duke didn’t seem to mind. “I’m sorry for yer loss, lad,” he said in a gentle voice. “And I’m sorry ye have nae other siblings, or even close cousins. As I recall, I’m yer cousin through yer grandmother’s line, aye?” At Griffin’s terse nod, the older man waved his hand dismissively again. “But a happier topic. Since yer father was a vicar, I assume ye have brought yer children up in such way?”

Griffin managed not to snort derisively. Bring his children up in the same cold, utilitarian way his own parents had raised him? Not likely.

Felicity, bless her, seemed to understand. “My husband is not particularly religious, Duncan, but we are members of the Church of England.”

“Och, that’s a shame,” the old man baited, a gleam in his eye.

Rupert cleared his throat. “The primary differences between the Anglican Church of England and the Church of Scotland is that Scotland uses a Presbyterian structure, which comes from the Greek word *presbyteros*, of course referring to the church being elder-led.”

Marcia rolled her eyes. “And the whole predestination thing.”

“Yes, of course,” agreed Rupert. “There are theological differences of course, but the Church of Scotland recognizes the authority of the kirks, like Grandfather Calderbank’s, while the Church of England’s structure involves bishops and hierarchy.”

“Either way, we belong to the Church of England,” Felicity said firmly, and Griffin had to hide a smile by how prim and proper she sounded. He wouldn’t have guessed this little scientist of his had firm beliefs about religion.

Marcia was nodding. “But Papa taught us one of *his* father’s prayers before meals. Remember, Rupert?”

Her brother pursed his lips. From his expression, it was clear he didn’t—mainly because his sister had made it up—but was trying to be polite.

“This is delightful,” interrupted the Duke, fingers entwined with Ian’s. “I look forward to hearing about your other family traditions. But for now, tell me about *yourselves*. Rupert, you are clearly a genius.”

“Clearly,” the lad intoned baldly, “although I suspect I merely appear to be a genius when compared to my siblings.”

Marcia threw a pillow at his head.

Chuckling, Duncan turned to her. “And *ye*, lassie, are certainly a firecracker. I can see how your parents have their

hands full with ye. As ye grow, yer father will be beating off men—”

Bull broke into chortles. “I sincerely doubt that, Yer Grace.”

“Call me Uncle Duncan, remember. And why would he not have to beat men off—”

“Please, for the love of God, Uncle Duncan,” managed Bull, in between laughs, “stop talking about Gruff beating men off.”

Griffin was having trouble containing his own snickers, and was surprised to feel Felicity shaking beside him. When he peeked at her, it was to discover her lips were pressed together, fighting laughter as well.

The knowing look she turned his way, as if they shared something, caused his blood to heat and his cock to twitch.

Or perhaps that was the way she slid her hand up his leg several inches.

Jesus Christ, this would be a terrible time for a cockstand, but how in the bloody hell was he supposed to control his reaction to her when she winked like that?

He wanted to taste her again.

He couldn't afford the distraction.

Tonight ye have to explore the house, discover Peasgoode's hiding spots. Discover the correspondence with Blackrose. Ye cannae crawl into her bed and lick her sweet cunny, because ye'll be busy, aye?

He'd rather say to hell with the mission and spend his time in her bed, again.

But he couldn't.

Meanwhile, the Duke had finally realized the joke and was chortling along with Ian and Bull, while Marcia looked confused and irritated, thank God.

“Bull!” she announced. “Stop it or I'll start looking for more pillows to throw.”

The lad, still chuckling, picked up his knitting once more. “I’m no’ worried, ye cannae throw for shi—”

“Bull,” interrupted his mother in a warning tone.

“Sorry. Cannae throw for S-H-I-T—”

Felicity harumphed. “It is not any better spelled out.”

“At least it was spelled correctly,” muttered Rupert under his breath.

Marcia, meanwhile, had lost her ladylike demeanor. “My aim is brilliant. Papa taught me to throw!”

“He didnae teach ye to juggle, that’s for certain,” Bull taunted.

Duncan burst into laughter again. “You can juggle, Griffin? I would love a demonstration!”

Well, *fook*. Nay, of course he couldn’t juggle. Who the hell *juggled*?

Ye’d better pray he doesnae ask ye to prove it.

Perhaps Felicity sensed this was getting out of hand. “Children, settle down, please. We cannot have the Duke thinking we have raised a group of”—she hesitated—“of D-E-V-I-L-L-S.”

“You didn’t,” muttered Rupert, hopefully too low for anyone else to hear.

But Duncan was still chuckling. “On the contrary, dear Mrs. Calderbank, I am charmed by how ye’ve allowed yer children to be themselves. I love that I get to see them as they truly are, rather than their straight-laced attempts at propriety. I’m delighted to see you care for them each deeply and have celebrated their uniqueness.”

Griffin could tell Felicity was uncomfortable with the praise, particularly since she’d admitted to not knowing much about childrearing. Her cheeks were bright pink, and she dropped her attention to her lap.

“Please, call me Felicity,” she said quietly. “Or rather, Flick.”

“I shall be delighted, my dear,” the Duke assured her. “Now, I dinnae have much more time before I have to rush off to my next obligation, but I want to ask about the letters you sent. Ian told me the *children* applied, and I was intrigued by that. So Bull, ye were the one who wrote all those delightful details? About your family traditions, and your piano playing, and the family octopus? What was his name, again?”

On cue, Bull, Marcia and Rupert all crossed themselves. “*Requiescat in pace, Snorky,*” they intoned together.

“Clearly *some* of your grandfather’s religious teachings were passed on,” the Duke pointed out.

Ian, meanwhile, had perked up. “You play the piano, Bull? I’d forgotten that!”

Bull’s expression turned a bit panicky as he slowly lowered the knitting. “Uhhh...”

Oh, shite. Another lie that was going to bite them in the arse?

Griffin frantically wracked his brain to come up with a way to turn the conversation away from his counterfeit stepson’s counterfeit piano ability. Nothing presented itself.

But Duncan’s expression had lit up. “Oh, Bull, Ian and I do so adore piano music. He used to be quite talented, ye ken.”

His secretary shot him a disgruntled look. “I still am.”

“Yes, dear, that’s what I meant.” Then to Griffin’s surprise, Duncan shot Bull a wink. “But we’d love to hear ye play. The piano in the corner there is tuned.”

The lad was hesitating, exchanging rattled looks with Marcia, now. “I, um...I’m no’ that good, Yer—Uncle Duncan.”

“Nonsense, lad, let’s hear ye!”

Griffin realized he was holding his breath as Bull stood and crossed slowly to the piano, dragging his feet as if a miracle would occur to save him. Glancing at Felicity, Griffin was surprised to find she seemed quite serene. Perhaps she

was thinking that the lad deserved this awkwardness, in order to see the consequences of lies?

“Really, Uncle Duncan,” the lad called over his shoulder, “I’m no’ particularly proficient...”

Ian shook his head. “No false modesty, lad! Let’s hear it.”

Bull’s back was to the room, but Griffin saw him take a deep breath and place his hands over the keys. Then he took another deep breath and lowered them...

Griffin was already wincing, expecting a cacophony.

Instead...completely tolerable music flowed from the piano. Actual *music*, not just banging about on the keys. Griffin’s brows rose and he leaned closer to Felicity.

“I underestimated the lad,” he murmured.

“Yes, I know.” She shot him a small smile to show she wasn’t bothered by his admission. “He is no maestro, but he is quite competent. Those long fingers of his needed to be put to good use occasionally—other than pickpocketing, I mean—and I am grateful he was given the chance.”

She said that like she wasn’t the one to give him that chance.

When Bull finished the piece, he popped up from the bench as if determined not to have to play again. When the applause began, his apprehensive look melted into his usual confidence, and he offered a few flamboyant bows.

Sighing with satisfaction, Duncan sat back in his chair. “My dears, this has been delightful! I have another appointment—a duke’s days are rarely his own, ye ken—and to my chagrin, already have a dinner engagement for this evening. But I look forward to meeting with you all again. Tomorrow morning, perhaps? And I promise to dine with you each evening you are here at Peasgoode!”

He sounded so hopeful, how could they deny him? Felicity smiled. “Of course, Duncan. We would like that as well.”

“Until tomorrow, then,” the older man declared cheerfully, as Ian rolled him toward the corridor.

As the door closed behind him, Griffin's family collapsed with grateful sighs.

"I like him!" declared Marcia, beaming around.

"Yes, dear sister," Rupert said somberly, "but if we want Father to win, we need Uncle Duncan to like *us* too."

"Well, I think he does!" She folded her arms in satisfaction. "We've fooled him!"

Over her head, Bull and Griffin exchanged a solemn glance. Fooling the Duke of Peasgoode no longer mattered quite as much.

Aye, they needed him to believe the Calderbanks were a happy family, to keep them in the Highlands longer.

But their priorities had changed, and that meant the investigation needed to take priority. More important than charming the Duke, more important than spending time with his family. More important, even, than the woman who was snuggled up against him.

He had a full day and night to find out more about their host, and that meant needing a clear head. He would have to avoid Felicity.

CHAPTER 14

FELICITY *KNEW* the Duke of Peasgoode was their enemy. Either he, or his secretary-cum-lover, had been in contact with Blackrose in Canada.

So why was he so wonderfully loveable?

He was the father she'd always wished for, the cheerful uncle she'd never had. The way he and Ian shared glances and grins made her wince at her parents' loveless marriage, and he made her laugh.

She wanted to hug him. Instead she was going to betray him.

It was their second morning at Peasgoode, and at that moment, the Duke was telling the children a story about his favorite picnicking spot. Theoretically, he was telling them *all*, but Felicity was distracted by her whirling thoughts.

Right up until the moment Griffin leaned down and whispered, "*Relax,*" in her ear.

His breath stirred the hairs on her neck, but that wasn't the reason she shivered, oh no.

It was his closeness. His scent.

It was *him*.

They were sitting beside one another on the sofa again, a spot she assumed Griffin had taken to fool Peasgoode. But when she twisted her head he didn't lean back, and her lips ended up inches from his.

Like a fool, she repeated in a whisper, “Relax?”

Was it her imagination, or did his lips curl up on one side? Griffin’s blue eyes were twinkling with something she couldn’t quite identify. “Ye’re tenser than a long-tailed cat in a rocking chair factory,” he murmured. “Ye need to relax.”

This close to him, she couldn’t possibly be expected to concentrate on anything besides how good he smelled. “I am relaxed. And what a cruel thing to do to a cat.”

“Och, nay, I’m kind to pussies.” His grin grew.

Good heavens, she’d thought him handsome with those dark scowls? When he grinned he looked positively playful.

Was it hot in here? It was definitely hot in here. Felicity had trouble catching her breath.

Impossibly, Griffin leaned *closer*. “Ye ken, I can help ye relax,” he murmured.

Relax? *Relax*? She was even tenser now, with every fiber of her being concentrated on his lips.

Was he going to kiss her? Right there in the Blue Room—perhaps she should call it the Blur Room?—in front of their children and the Duke and Ian?

Yes.

Yes, please.

She licked her lips, and his gaze dropped to them. He was going to do it!

But from across the room, the Duke’s voice interrupted them. “And what do ye think of *that*, Griffin?”

Without hesitating, Griffin straightened and sent a *relaxed* smile toward the older man. “I think it’s a fine idea,” he announced, proving either he was very good at pretending he knew what was going on, or he really *had* been paying attention.

Oh my. And here Felicity was, trying to just remember how to breathe...

“Excellent!” Duncan announced with a little clap. “I’ll have Mrs. Bobo inform the cook, and they’ll arrange a little picnic for us soon. I’d love to show yer children the property.” He winked. “It’s important to be proper stewards, especially if ye want to have control over this place someday!”

The children sucked in delighted breaths, but Griffin maintained his casual attitude. “I think we’d like that verra much, Duncan.”

Ian leaned forward then, his elbows planted on his knees. “Remember, Duncan, you wanted to ask Flick something?”

“Flick—Och, *Felicity*.” The old man beamed. “What a delightful nickname, dear. Ian told me all about Bull’s talent with sobriquets.” He screwed up his face in thought for a moment, then his expression cleared. “I remember now, I wanted to see yer photography apparatus. Is it true that ye really take daguerreotypes?”

Did he really want to know? Felicity exchanged a glance with Ian, who was nodding enthusiastically.

“Actually, Duncan...” She swallowed, then straightened her spine. “Actually, I take photographs. Daguerreotypes are considered old-fashioned at this point.”

“Like me,” the Duke chuckled. “Well, what’s the difference?”

Hesitating, Felicity snuck a look at Griffin. He seemed at ease and nodded encouragement, which she hadn’t expected.

“I doubt you really want to hear all about my hobby—”

“It’s nae hobby,” Griffin interrupted, speaking to the room at large. “Flick has invented new methods, and is verra well thought of in the scientific community. Well, the photographic scientific community, at least.”

She was blushing. She *knew* she was blushing, and she hated it, because she’d always suspected her skin turned as red as her hair. But how could she *not* blush, when he was saying such nice things about her? Oh, certainly, he was merely playing the role of a proud spouse, but still...

“I am not all that important,” she murmured, dropping her gaze to her hands, linked in her lap.

“Aye, ye are, Flick.”

Then his large hand was covering hers. That callused hand, which had shown her so much pleasure only two nights ago, merely because she’d asked him.

That, and you bribed him. And you were caught. Perhaps that was why he stayed away last night.

The sobering reminder had had lifting her chin once more.

Without looking at him, she took a deep breath and launched into an explanation. Usually, right around the discussion about apertures, people’s eyes started to glaze over. It was something she had learned young, and why she always preferred the company of her cats over Society; she never knew when to stop talking about her projects, so she didn’t talk about them at all.

But here were Duncan and Ian and even Rupert nodding along in interest as she explained the difference between silver halides and other emulsions, and how the Frenchman Louis Le Prince had recently traveled to America to further his studies, was even further along than she was, and how they all shared information openly.

Bull called out some helpful hints, and it was gratifying to know that while he was clearly more interested in the lovely blue scarf he was still working on, he’d been paying attention to her work.

And while Marcia looked bored to tears, her chin propped up on one palm, even Griffin offered insights from his place by her side.

Soon, the weight of his hand on hers became comforting. Normal. As if things had always been this way.

Finally, Duncan interrupted. “I feel certain Ian would’ve told ye to bring yer equipment, lass. Did ye?”

Her mouth was still open, mid-dissertation about the benefits of silver nitrates and potassium bromide, but she

slowly shut it. Then she nodded. “Yes,” she admitted. “I brought some of my cameras.”

“Excellent! I wish for ye to photograph me! Me and Ian!”

“I—usually my subjects are cats, Your Grace.”

“Duncan,” he corrected. “And I promise, I will behave better than a kitten. Go, go and fetch them. Ian will help.”

In fact, Griffin accompanied her upstairs to retrieve the important items, while the children kept the Duke and Ian occupied with more stories of their childhood—the Lord only knew how many were true. Felicity found herself more nervous than anything else, squinting in the dim light from the chandelier swaying over her bed and dropping important boxes, until Griffin swooped in to rescue her.

“Relax, Flick,” he reminded her with a wink. “I’ll take these.”

“But—” She tried to protest, but he bent down and placed a quick kiss on her lips.

It was over before it began, but left her reeling.

He’d *kissed* her. Ian wasn’t there. *No* one was there, except the two of them. There was no need for them to appear to be in a loving marriage.

She tried to work through it logically, but her brain kept getting stuck on the feel of his lips on hers, until the only explanation she could come up with was that he’d kissed her because he’d *wanted* to kiss her.

And now Griffin was watching her, one side of his lips quirked upward again. It wasn’t a smile, but it wasn’t his usual scowl either.

“Stop trying to overthink things, Flick. It’ll be alright.” And then he kissed her again.

She found herself whimpering and leaning into him, and when he pulled back, he was most definitely smiling.

And she was too.

When they returned to the Blue Room, she was in a thoughtful frame of mind but was quickly distracted by the Duke's excitement.

"Shall we go out into the gardens, Felicity? Is the lighting better there?"

"No, I can photograph you here."

"No' in my chair! Ian, come help me out of this blasted contraption. Rupert, be a dear and fetch that walking stick."

When Duncan barked instructions, he sounded surprisingly like an older version of Griffin. She snuck a glance at him, but he was gesturing to Bull.

"Can ye manage here, Flick?" he asked under his breath.

She squared her shoulders. "Do you have *any* idea how many times I've photographed a subject, Griffin?"

"Good." His grin was lightning fast, there and gone in a blink, but her heart swelled to see it. "Then I think Bull and I need to go for a bit of a walk, if ye can keep the Duke occupied?"

"Of course I—Why are you winking? Should I be winking—*Oh!*" She lowered her voice. "Does this have to do with the you-know-what?"

His grin had faded to a scowl once more. "I swear to Christ, I need to teach ye all the basics of spywork. Bull! Ye're going on a walk with me!"

The lad was a quicker study than she was, apparently. "Absolutely, Gruff!" he said loudly. "I'm assuming because ye need my help fetching that *thing?*"

"Och, aye." Griffin was practically bellowing now. "I need yer help getting the thing from the—the *place.*"

"Well, I'm yer man! Lead on!"

They were both overacting to a frightening degree, but no one else seemed to notice.

Besides, after they left, Felicity was occupied arranging the Duke and his secretary in the best poses. Marcia turned out

to be a good assistant, and was just bossy enough to get the job done.

She overheard Ian ask what *thing* Griffin had needed, and Marcia just shrugged and said, “You know, the *thing*.”

Rupert seemed interested in the technology Felicity used, so she explained what she was doing as she went along. Then, when it came time to develop the photographs, she took the boy with her and left Marcia to entertain the Duke with her complaints about women’s suffrage and lack of sensible footwear and the scourge that was corsets.

A short while later, Felicity and Rupert returned with the photographs printed from the plates. She carried her favorite: Marcia had posed the Duke in a wing-back chair in front of the fire, having him sit toward the front of the seat with his hands crossed on his cane between his legs, proudly displaying his clan colors. Ian standing behind and at his side, one hand on the Duke’s shoulder and the other holding a leather-bound book tucked against his side.

They were both smiling.

When she carefully handed that photograph to Duncan by a corner—it was still damp—he sucked in a breath.

She watched his hand trembling as he reached up to take Ian’s, his gaze never leaving the photograph. “Och, Ian,” he whispered. “She’s captured us perfectly, has she no’?”

The taller man leaned down, a smile on his lips, but tears in his eyes as he brushed his fingertips along the image’s edge. Then those same fingertips rose to rest on Duncan’s cheek. “Aye, Duncan, she has.”

Their smiles were full of love for one another, and Felicity felt a jolt in her chest so strong she had to turn away, had to force herself to breathe.

That love, the love she saw between two old men who’d found a way to make a life together...she wanted that. She wanted a home, a family. She wanted someone who would be glad to see her each day, who was interested in *her*.

Seventeen years.

It had been seventeen years since she'd lost her innocence, in every sense. Since she'd had those childhood dreams of love and family stolen from her.

Felicity pressed a fist into her sternum and willed herself not to cry, *willed* Rupert and Marcia to entertain the men a bit longer, so she could concentrate on breathing.

Seventeen years ago, when she'd heard Exingham's response to her pregnancy, she'd been forced to put aside those childish dreams of future happiness. She'd built herself a life, then had to rebuild it when Exingham demanded Bull. But by God, she had *rebuilt* it, then rebuilt it *again* when Bull had returned, and she was proud of her life. She *was*.

So why did this life she'd built and rebuilt suddenly feel so empty?

Why did the love in an old man's expression tear her open with sudden longing? Remind her of what she'd once wanted and long ago given up on?

Because now Griffin is in your heart.

Could it be that simple?

She sucked in a breath which sounded more like a sob. She'd been happy in the life she'd built with Bull. But now that she'd welcomed defiant Marcia and scholarly Rupert, and aye, their father—grumpy, arousing, intriguing, heart-wrenching, handsome-beyond-belief, *caring*, protective Griffin—into her heart, how could she possibly return to her simple existence of last month?

She was falling in love with each of them.

You are just saying that because he licked your cunny.

Aaaannnd just like that she went from shocked to embarrassed, thanks entirely to her inner dialogue, that bitch.

What? It is true.

Yes, but it was rude to bring it up in conversation.

This is not exactly conversation though, is it? You cannot argue with yourself.

She was doing a bang-up job of it, though.

You are falling in love with Griffin because he is the first man to show you kindness. The first man to take the time to ensure your pleasure. The first man to look at you and see your interests and be proud of them.

Well...yes. Wasn't that a worthwhile reason? Any of them. All of them.

Perhaps. How does he feel?

Griffin was only at Peasgoode because he was involved in the fight against Blackrose. And why not? The evil man killed Griffin's wife, the mother of his children...his love. No wonder he was willing to go along with this ridiculous scheme—not to gain a dukedom, but to bring down Blackrose.

He was not the sort of man to develop feelings for a woman just because he'd licked her cunny. He'd done it out of necessity, because he'd thought that was the only way Felicity would help him on his mission.

That wasn't true, of course, but she'd let him believe that.

And he hadn't returned to her bed since, thinking he'd fulfilled his obligation.

She wanted him again.

She wanted him in her bed, between her legs. She wanted him *in her heart*.

Was that so wrong?

Perhaps not the right time for this.

Behind her, the conversation had grown stilted, and Felicity knew she didn't have time right now for this inner argument. She would have plenty of time to debate the intelligence of chasing after Griffin tonight, when she was *alone* in her bed.

Right.

Right.

“Felicity? Do ye have more photographs for us?”

She plastered on a smile and turned back to the man who held the answers to finding Blackrose. “Of course, Your Grace.”

CHAPTER 15

PERHAPS IT HAD BEEN COWARDLY to leave the gathering, but Griffin had seen his opportunity and taken it. With the Duke—*excuse me, Duncan, we're cousins, are we no'?*—and Ian occupied, he would get no better chance to poke around Peasgoode.

And taking Bull with him had seemed like a good idea at the time. After all, the lad had a rare talent as a pickpocket. Perhaps he'd make a good sneak thief.

Ye're a terrible parental figure. Encouraging the lad to try lock-picking?

Everyone needed a career. Griffin had first-hand experience with strange employment choices. Who would've imagined the son of a vicar growing up to live by his fists?

It was for a good cause.

Or so he'd thought.

Hands in the pockets of his trousers, trying to appear casual—and to assuage his guilt—Griffin cleared his throat as they strolled toward the Duke's study. "So, lad, have ye given any thought to a future career path? I notice ye're no' attending school."

"Nay," Bull announced cheerfully, waving his fingers at a footman, who frowned and hurried in the opposite direction. "I had tutors when I lived with my sister and her husband, and of course my brother *tried*. His new wife was originally the governess he hired, ye ken, but bless her for trying, she's no' exactly a fount of information when it comes to fashion. Since

moving to London, my studies have been a bit lax. Flick buys me books on textile technology.”

Griffin’s brow twitched, forgetting to ask about Bull’s brother in favor of following *this* line of questioning. “And *that’s* what interests ye?”

“How could ye doubt it?” The lad paused in their entirely too-nonchalant stroll and struck a pose, leg extended. “I chose the linen for these trousers myself. Granted, they’re entirely inappropriate for the current weather, but I needed to put my best foot forward, so to speak.”

Despite their current mission, Griffin found himself intrigued by Bull’s claim. He peered down at the extended leg. “Ye chose that material?”

“Aye, the green stripes are a fine contrast, I thought, to the purple in my waistcoat.”

Griffin frowned. “I’ll have to take yer word for that, lad. So...ye want to be a tailor?”

“Good Lord, nay!” Bull straightened, brushed imaginary lint off his lapels, removed a timepiece, and began to twirl it. “I want to *set* the fashion standards.”

“God help us all,” Griffin muttered, eyeing the lad’s choice of clothing. Irritated now, he began his stalk toward where he imagined the duke’s study to be. “Yer mother allows ye to spend money so frivolously? Or do ye steal it?”

Bull made a little hurt noise that cut Griffin, but he refused to allow himself to glance at the lad to see if he’d been offended.

After a moment, Bull took a deep breath. “When I moved in with Flick, I made a promise to her that I would cease my childish thievery, and attempt to act civilized. In return, she gives me a small allowance, as does my brother.”

Who was the lad’s brother?

Normally the question would intrigue Griffin, but now he was focused on the casual comment about *moving in* with

Felicity. He still didn't understand her past, and he should, considering he was pretending to be married to her.

“And ye used that allowance to buy that watch?” he asked, jerking his thumb at the timepiece the lad was still twirling as they walked.

“This? Nay.” Griffin *heard* Bull's cocky grin. “I borrowed this from Thorne *before* I moved to London with Flick.”

“Och, aye? And does Thorne *ken* ye're the one who 'borrowed' it from him?”

This time, Griffin glanced at the lad to see his grin grow. “Nay, but Thorne doesnae count. It's more of a game with him.”

Actually, Griffin could see that. The Viscount Thornebury never seemed to take anything seriously. “Turn here. We're looking for the study.”

“It's that one with the double doors,” Bull announced matter-of-factly. “I found it the night before last, but it was locked.”

Aye, Griffin had found it as well. He'd spent last night mapping out the place at two o'clock in the morning, all to keep from crawling back into Felicity's bed and licking her until she came again.

He'd been a fool not to return to her bed, but he'd been punishing himself for taking what she'd offered.

Swallowing down that aching memory, he snorted at the lad's claim. “And ye didnae break the lock?”

“I've never had the knack for lock-picking, and I *did* promise Flick I'd go straight.” His tone sounded hurt. “Besides, I had to come back and check on her. I'm glad I did.”

He'd almost interrupted his mother's pleasure.

It was easy to recognize the lad's intent, and Griffin stopped. Bull was lashing out, *trying* to hurt Griffin in retaliation. And Griffin had to be the adult about it.

“Look, lad...” He turned to Bull with a sigh. “I’m sorry. I shouldnae antagonize ye.” It was easier to stare over Bull’s shoulder, but Griffin forced himself to meet the lad’s gaze. “I’ve grown used to protecting my family, and I didnae trust ye for the longest time.”

Bull’s fingers were rarely still, but now they gripped the watch chain tightly, his chin set mulishly. “Do ye trust me now?”

“Ye entered me into this stupid contest, announcing my past to the world.”

“*Ah.*” Bull’s brows drew in. “So that’s a nay?”

Griffin sighed again. “I didnae say that. I...” Shite, this was uncomfortable. “I didnae trust ye because yer presence opened my family up to the outside world. No’ just *ye* and yer mother, but that door. *Anyone* could enter my house, threaten Marcia and Rupert.”

Bull’s light gaze was intense. He didn’t have his mother’s green eyes, not exactly, but there was something about her in the shape of his nose and mouth, and his auburn hair was only a few shades darker than Felicity’s.

“I would never hurt Marcia or Rupert. Neither would Flick.”

Griffin’s nod was slow. “Aye, lad. It’s taken me a while, but I believe that.”

At one point, he’d assumed the flashy boy next door was trying to impress, *seduce* his innocent daughter.

Now that he’d seen them together, he knew, a) Bull really and truly thought of Marcia as his best friend, just as Felicity had always said, and b) if he ever tried anything, Marcia could likely beat Bull in a fight. With one hand tied behind her back.

Depending if she was wearing trousers at the time. In trousers, she could probably do it with both hands tied behind her back.

Now, the young man standing in front of him—almost as tall, in fact—was watching him seriously. After a moment, he

nodded, apparently satisfied with Griffin's understanding of his character. But he wasn't done.

"And my mother?" The chain of the watch stretched between Bull's fists. "Ye trust her?"

"I do."

"Are ye planning on hurting her?"

Well, fook.

Griffin knew what the lad was asking, and he was uncomfortable enough to glance away to lock his gaze on the ornamental frame of the painting behind Bull. He swallowed. "I would never do anything to hurt yer mother, lad."

In fact, he was doing everything he could to bring her *pleasure*.

Probably best not to say that.

"Are ye certain?"

At Bull's question, Griffin's gaze dropped back to him. The lad was looking uncharacteristically serious.

And Griffin understood. There was more kinds of hurt than just the physical. Whatever was in Felicity's past, she'd been hurt, same as Griffin. Bull knew it, and was trying to protect his mother, a noble cause.

The boy *had* to understand what was passing between his mother and Griffin, and he wasn't objecting. He'd heard his mother's scream as she'd found pleasure, that first night, and he hadn't burst in. He wanted his mother to be happy.

The realization was... Well, not surprising, but interesting.

"Ye want what's best for her?"

The young man's nod was immediate. "Aye, of course."

"Well then, Bull, I promise ye this"—Griffin stepped forward, lowering his voice—"I will protect her with my life. I will care for her as long as she wants me to. Do ye understand?"

Bull's gaze raked his face, then he nodded. "Aye, Gruff, I think I do."

And for the first time, Griffin heard the affection behind the ridiculous nickname.

This young man, this strange lad he'd been forced to accept into his life for Marcia's sake...he was like no one Griffin had ever met before. His love for life, his unabashed, unapologetic approach to what was expected and what he wanted...it was unique, aye, but in an instant, Griffin could understand why it was so appealing.

Perhaps if Rupert grew up a bit more like Bull and a bit less like ye, he'd be happier.

It was...an interesting thought.

Aye, this lad was almost as intriguing as his mother.

And Felicity was *very* intriguing indeed.

Griffin stuck out his hand. "Truce?"

"Truce," agreed Bull, relief shading his expression as he took the hand enthusiastically. "I really *can* be helpful in this investigation, ye ken."

Emotions shoved aside, Griffin turned back to the task at hand. "Aye, and the first thing to learn is no' to refer to yer *investigation* where anyone can hear ye. Ye'll note that the study door is unlocked?"

"Aye, and I can play blundering better than ye."

Before Griffin understood what the young man was about, Bull had stumbled into the double doors, holding onto one as it swung open.

"Hello, lads!" he called to whoever sat unseen inside. "I was looking for His Grace. Is he here? The *Blue Room*? Och, I should've kenned that! Well, my apologies, I'll leave ye to yer verra important work!" He winked and waved cheerily as he backed out of the room. "Ta!"

His smile dropped as soon as he reached Griffin's side, and the pair swung in unison toward the larger corridor, moving in

tandem as if they'd intended to be strolling this way all along.

“Well?” hissed Griffin.

“There’s three of them in there. Two clerks, I couldnae tell with the third. Perhaps another clerk? He was standing over the shoulder of one of the others—orange, frizzy hair, unmistakable—and looked irritated.”

“A supervisor?”

“Aye, likely.”

It didn’t matter who the third man was. What Bull had found was that the room was occupied during the day, which meant they wouldn’t be able to explore it. “Could ye draw me a map of the desks and such?”

“Only if ye take me with ye when ye break in.”

They’d reached the foyer, and Griffin swung on the young man with a fierce scowl. “Absolutely no’. And I want yer promise—*yer word, Bull*—that ye’ll no’ go poking about at night any longer.” He leaned closer, trying to ignore the lad’s mulish frown. “Ye ken the man I’m up against is verra dangerous. These scars, they arenae decoration. I just swore to ye to keep yer mother safe, and by God, I’ll do the same for ye, even if that means locking ye in!”

Bull’s frown turned stubborn.

“Swear it, lad! I cannae do my job if I have to worry about yer safety as well.”

“Nae one’s going to hurt—”

“Last night, after midnight, I was creeping through the east wing—it’s almost abandoned over there, but I thought Peasgoode might have another study—a suit of armor fell.” He gestured angrily, giving the approximation of a man holding a big ax. “Damned near took my arm off.”

Bull shook his head. “An accident.”

“Aye, likely. But I cannae be distracted worrying about *accidents* to ye!”

His angry hiss seemed to hang in the air around them for a long moment, before Bull finally understood his intensity.

With a huff, the lad rolled his eyes. “*Fine*. I’ll stay in bed like a good little lad.”

Griffin blew out a relieved breath. “Thank fook.”

Whatever Bull might’ve said was interrupted by a footman, approaching with an envelope on a silver platter. “Mr. Calderbank? A letter for you, sir.”

A letter? Who knew he was here?

He scooped up the letter, too distracted to thank the man. Luckily, Bull did, with that same alarming wink and wave, which sent the footman scurrying off while Bull chuckled.

“It’s from the Duke of Exingham,” Griffin muttered, slicing open the envelope.

Bull’s focus was immediate. “What’s it say? Is it about the investi—the *ye ken what?*”

But Griffin was already scanning the man’s neat print.

CALDERBANK,

I hope this letter reaches you, *and* finds you and your family well. Thorne has told us your plan, and we agree it is a fine one. You have a unique opportunity here. On behalf of the rest of us, do not squander it.

Our agents in C. have been able to intercept a packet from P. The postal franking is unmistakable, in terms of return address. It was unsigned, only a scrawled “W” at the bottom. Make of that what you can.

GRIFFIN READ it under his breath to Bull.

“*Agents in C* must mean Canada,” the lad whispered back. “And *P* is obviously Peasgoode. But the Duke’s name doesnae start with a *W*.”

“Aye,” Griffin muttered. “And neither does *Ian Armstrong*.”

“So are we dealing with someone else?”

“Or a code name.” Griffin *hated* code names, they got so fooking confusing. “We’ll need to keep searching. Nay, *I’ll*—”

“Aye, aye, *ye’ll* search, I’ll just be charming and distracting.”

Griffin nodded. “Good. There’s a postscript.” He frowned. “For *ye*?”

“Really?” Bull craned his neck. “What’s it say?”

“Postscript: Tell Bull, Honoria’s increasing again. Once this is handled, I know she would love to have him visit.”

The words were barely out of his mouth before Bull gasped and snatched the letter from Griffin’s hands, as if reading them with his own eyes could offer insight.

Why in the hell was the bloody Duke of bloody Exingham writing a postscript to *Bull*? “Who’s Honoria?” he barked.

Bull’s gaze was still greedily devouring the words on the page. “My sister,” he said without looking up. “She’s married to Laird MacLeod, up on Skye—I lived with them. Her first pregnancy was dangerous, I ken she wouldnae want to travel with this one.”

Griffin glanced around. They were standing in the foyer, and would be certain to attract attention. He took the lad’s elbow and steered him toward the large front door, where another impassive footman let them out into the bright, crisp sunshine.

Bull was distracted enough not to flirt with this one, at least.

Perhaps they could investigate the flower gardens or something for a while, while Griffin got some answers.

“Yer sister lives on Skye?” And married to a *laird*?

Bull had refolded the letter and now handed it back to Griffin to slip into his jacket. “Half-sister, one of—och, I

always lose count of them all.” He shrugged. “When Flick dropped me off at Exingham, turned out my father wanted nothing to do with me, after all. Honoria more or less raised me.”

He’d shrugged and shoved his hands in his pockets, which proved exactly how nervous this conversation was making him. Even Griffin, who’d known the lad only a few months, could tell that. So he treaded carefully.

“I can see that ye’d be concerned about her pregnancy, then. Do ye want to visit her while we’re in the Highlands?”

“Aye, of course!” A pained smile flickered across the boy’s face briefly. “Crowe, her husband, was the first to call me Ye Little Shite, ye ken. That *was* my nickname for a while.”

“Aye, well, it fits,” Griffin mumbled, and was gratified to see a *real* grin cross the lad’s face. “And...Honorina, yer half-sister...she lived at Exingham when ye—when ye were dropped off there?”

“Och, aye, of course. She was unmarried, and my father’s hostess for a long while.”

Griffin felt as if he had all the strings of a spider’s web in one hand, and if he gave them a tug, either everything would fall into place...or he’d be covered in sticky crap.

“And...who was yer father, lad?”

Bull stopped on the gravel path, looking surprised. “Ye dinnae ken that? James Lindsay, the Duke of Exingham! I’m his bastard. Rourke”—he nodded to the letter in Griffin’s jacket—“is my half-brother!”

Griffin exhaled.

Bull was the son—the *bastard* son of the old Duke of Exingham. Griffin had heard all the hints, all the references, and all this time, he’d assumed Bull was tangentially related to Exingham. A Lindsay cousin or second cousin, perhaps.

He’d known Felicity hadn’t been married, but hadn’t asked who the father of her child had been. Hadn’t asked why she hadn’t raised Bull.

Hadn't asked quite a few questions, for fear of being asked about *his* past in return.

"Rourke Lindsay, Blackrose's Blade, is yer brother?" he clarified.

"Aye, which is how I ken Demon and Thorne and all about the—the *no' an investigation.*"

"Look, lad, ye're shite at subterfuge, but brilliant at stupid nicknames. Just come up with one for what we're doing here."

"Elephant hunting."

"What?" Griffin frowned.

Bull didn't hesitate. "That's why we're at Peasgoode. We're elephant hunting."

That was...remarkably fast. But Griffin nodded. "Aye, fine. Elephant hunting. So ye kened about it through yer brother, he told ye?"

"Also, I'm verra good at listening at keyholes."

Maybe he *would* make a good spy one day.

Shaking his head, Griffin turned back toward the gardens. "Come on, lad, let's take a stroll. We can get the lay of the land, and ye can teach me to juggle."

"*What?*"

Griffin snorted. "Ye expect me to believe ye *dinnae* ken how to juggle?"

"Well, aye, I do..." The lad sounded uncharacteristically confused, which made Griffin's lips twitch.

"*Apparently*, thanks to yer lies, I do as well. How much would ye wager than Peasgoode asks me to demonstrate my juggling talent sometime?"

"Nae wager." Bull grinned again. "For the record, that wasnae my idea. Marcia can be determined."

"Aye, that she can, lad," Griffin agreed as he slapped Bull on his shoulder. And instead of pulling away, he kept his hand there, and squeezed slightly as they walked. "Now, ye see that

set of glass double doors? We ken that's the Blue Room, based on where it sits in the house. So we can extrapolate that's another sitting room, nestled beside the conservatory. What do ye think is above them?"

It was rare to see Bull without a smirk, but right now, his grin seemed less cocky and more excited. The kind of grin of a sixteen-year-old lad who was eager to learn, as he patted his pockets theatrically. "Should I be taking notes?"

"Nay, for now we're just trying to map the house."

"For our elephant hunt?"

"For *my* elephant hunt. Ye're going to be charming, distracting, and *safe*, aye?"

Bull's grin turned back to that cocky one again. "Aye, of course."

Sometimes it was difficult to believe him.

But as they strolled, and pointed out various rooms in the estate, and Griffin made a mental map, he had to admit that he was starting to enjoy the lad's company. He *would* keep Bull safe, and not for Felicity, not even for Rourke Lindsay, the Duke of Exingham. He'd do it because he, Griffin, cared for the lad.

Much to his surprise.

CHAPTER 16

HE HADN'T COME to her again last night, and Felicity had lacked the courage to ask him *why*. But the revelations of the day, the things she'd learned about herself...

She wanted to share those with him.

Well, no, obviously not *share* them with *him*, that would be terrifying. And stupid. If he didn't feel the same way she did, it would be foolish to admit such a thing.

Especially since she wasn't certain of her feelings herself.

She'd spent a lifetime without anyone with whom to discuss her findings and theories. She was used to keeping her own counsel, working through problems on her own.

So why did she have such a strong urge to discuss *this*? Why did she want to talk about her feelings for Griffin...*with Griffin*?

That seemed like a logical fallacy.

Phallus-y?

Last night he hadn't come to her, and seeing as how the clock had ticked past midnight, Felicity suspected he wasn't going to come to her tonight either.

Did he think he'd satisfied her curiosity? Did he think she was *done* learning from him?

She was a scientist; she would never stop learning!

And, she suspected, Griffin had years of things he could teach her.

Felicity lay in her bed, hands crossed over her stomach, staring up at the chandelier. What an odd choice; to hang it directly over the bed. And it seemed rickety, swaying slightly in the nonexistent breeze.

Last night she'd stayed awake as long as she could, waiting for him, but when she'd slept, it had been deep and refreshing. It meant that she wasn't the least bit tired now.

She needed something to exhaust her.

She needed Griffin.

With an irritated huff, Felicity threw back the covers and swung her legs off the bed. If he thought she was done with him, he had another think coming! He owed her, didn't he? She'd skipped up to the Highlands, was doing a bang-up job at convincing the Duke and Ian that they were one big, happy—highly functioning, not at all conspiratorial—family, and was *falling in love with the man*.

The least he could do was make love to her again.

Perhaps three or four times. Five times, at least.

By this time in her irritation, she'd managed to pull on her dressing gown and was standing in front of the adjoining door to his chamber. Without her spectacles, everything was a blur, but she'd seen it yesterday; it was almost the same as her own, but decorated in maroons and gold, as compared to hers which was mainly in blues.

She'd always found blue soothing.

But tonight Felicity couldn't relax, and she suspected it had nothing to do with the wallpaper, and everything to do with who wasn't in the room with her.

Taking a deep breath, she pushed open the door to the connecting changing room, walked through, and then boldly stepped into *his* room.

She expected to hear snoring, or at least deep breathing. A mound under the covers on the bed, or perhaps—if he was having trouble sleeping—propped up reading a book. Did

Griffin enjoy novels? She'd only ever seen him read the newspaper.

He wasn't reading anything now.

He wasn't even there.

She checked.

Not in bed, not in the bathing room, not in the closet, not under the desk.

By the time she realized she was bending over, checking *under the blasted desk* for a full-grown man, it should've been obvious he wasn't there.

He wasn't in the room.

So where was he?

And that's when she remembered how he and Bull had gone off that morning *and* the day before, poking around. Bull had invited her on a tour of the gardens that afternoon, and told her how they'd searched for hints of Peasgoode's connection to Blackrose, but hadn't found anything so far. The investigation was hampered by their secrecy.

"He's shite at small talk, Flick," her son had announced proudly. "So Griffin's put me in charge of making friends with the servants and stable hands. He thinks I can likely get information he cannae."

"He is smart," she'd admitted wryly. "But you *will* be careful, Bull, do you understand?"

He'd glanced at her, his grin softening to something else. Something which reminded her of the sticky, sweet boy he used to be. He'd slipped his hand into hers then, and squeezed.

"Aye, Mother. I'll stay safe."

It was a sweet memory, but now that Felicity considered it—standing in the middle of Griffin's room, tapping her lip irritably—her son hadn't told her what *Griffin* would be up to.

"He is sneaking about in the dark," she muttered, glaring at the fire which was burning down. "*That* is why he did not come to me last night."

Or tonight.

She wasn't sure if she was happy to have such a simple explanation, or frustrated he hadn't shared his plans with her.

If he had, you would just spend this time worrying over him, would you not?

Well, yes. Perhaps he'd been trying to do her a favor.

Hmmm. Perhaps *she* should do *him* a favor.

Just as that thought popped into her head, there was a sound from next door. *Her* room. It was a muffled sort of thud, and caused her to swing back to the room in surprise. She yanked open the door, half-expecting to see Griffin standing there, but stopped still at what she *did* see.

Squinting, Felicity wondered if she needed her glasses after all.

No, no, there was no mistaking what had happened.

The chandelier had fallen.

Right out of the ceiling; even *she* could see where the connecting chain had neatly snapped in two, causing it to plunge down atop the bed, severely inconveniencing anyone who might have been lying there.

As she had been, an hour ago. As she *and* Griffin had been, two nights ago.

Oh dear.

Well, other than the dust caused by the thing's fall, there appeared to be no reason to scream or wake the household. It could be addressed in the morning. In the meanwhile, she would say quite a few prayers of thanks that neither she nor Griffin had been lying in the bed at the time.

Griffin...

Her thoughts turned to her earlier plan. After all, there was no way she *could* sleep in her own chamber tonight, could she?

A yawn caught her by surprise, and she finished with a smile.

Stripping out of her dressing gown and nightgown, she laid both over one of the chairs in Griffin's chambers and climbed into the big bed. His was even larger than hers, the headboard and posts made of a thick, dark wood, and the counterpane nice and fluffy.

There were, however, far too few pillows.

She nestled into the exact center of the bed, curled up on her side, and promptly went to sleep.

The fire had burned to embers and the moon had set—the room was pitch-dark, was the point—when she woke to the sound of the door opening.

Felicity stared up in the darkness, her breathing shallow so she could listen to the sounds across the room. There were very few of them. Was Griffin wearing shoes, or padding around Peasgoode in the dark in just his stockinged feet?

The next sound she heard was near the bureau, and she marveled how he'd moved across the chamber without making noise. He fumbled for something, then the lamp clicked on.

From a distance, her eyesight wasn't the best without her glasses, but she could see him well enough to see the frown tugging at his lips, see the way his brows were drawn in either disappointment or irritation. She hoped she wasn't about to make it worse.

"Hello," she said.

His reaction was immediate; Griffin dropped to a crouch and spun about, a knife appearing in his fist as if by magic.

Since she was sitting up in his bed, and quite naked, she hoped he was able to determine she wasn't a threat.

Still, he paused for a moment, expression blank as if trying to place her...before he blinked and straightened. "Jesus Christ, Flick, what are ye doing? Trying to kill me?"

"Says the man with a knife in his hand." She tried to make light of the situation. "Do you always tiptoe around the dark

with a knife?”

He turned back to the dresser, his movements stiff and economical, and slipped the dagger into a sheath at the back of his belt. “Aye.”

Aye? He *did* always sneak about with a knife?

She remembered the way he’d pinned her to the wall thinking she was a housebreaker, and her heart began to thump louder. He’d carried a knife that night too. Slowly, she raised a hand to her neck, pressing the pads of her fingertips to the hollow at the base of her throat.

He was dangerous.

He was unpredictable.

How could she possibly love him?

Love was a ridiculous construct, nothing more than a chemical reaction to lust, a biological urge to mate and continue the species. If love *was* real, it would be foolish indeed to look for it with a man who growled more than spoke, glared more than smiled, and had an alarming past he didn’t talk about.

A man who even now was stripping out of his dark clothes.

A man whose body made her itch to touch him, to be touched.

A man who’d been gentle when he’d shown her how to be loved.

She hadn’t told him that had been her first time receiving pleasure. She should have told him that.

She would.

“Griffin?”

He grunted. Of course he grunted, would it kill him to speak in sentences? He was focused on his buttons.

“I...wanted to tell you something.”

“Is that why ye’re here, Flick?” Griffin didn’t look at her, but yanked his shirt from his shoulders, revealing that achingly imperfect stretch of skin. His movements, when he removed his knife-belt, were equally economical. “Or did ye want to hear details of the elephant—I mean, the investigation?”

Well, now that he mentioned it... “Did you learn anything tonight?”

“Not a God-damned thing.” He hid the belt in a drawer, then dropped his trousers. Felicity didn’t look away. “I picked apart Peasgoode’s study—or rather, Ian’s. It’s clear they share the burden of the estate. I went through every drawer, ever ledger I could find—”

“Did you make it look as if a thief had been through?”

The look he shot her—standing there in his stockings and smallclothes, fists on hips—bordered on mortally offended. “Nae one will ever know I was there, Flick.”

She hid her smile. Confident, wasn’t he?

“If there’s evidence linking Peasgoode to Blackrose, I cannae find it.” He blew out an exasperated breath and dragged a hand through his dark hair, causing the strands to stand up adorably. “I was *sure* it would be in his study. I’ll have to check his chambers tomorrow.”

Her eyes widened. “That will be dangerous, will it not?”

“Aye, but I ken the Duke’s movements now. He’s no’ in his rooms during the day—and neither is Ian. If it’s there, I’ll find it.”

Felicity pulled up her knees and wrapped her arms around them. “Perhaps they are just very good at hiding it. Or perhaps he is not the one who has been in contact with Blackrose?”

Griffin was already shaking his head as he unsnapped his socks from their garters and pulled them both down. “If someone is sending Blackrose packets of information, and *receiving* them in return, then it is someone who has the run of this place. Someone important, who has access to all the areas, and can control the mail. If no’ the Duke, then Ian. Or one of the clerks, with Ian’s permission.”

Well, it was hard to argue with that logic. Felicity had opened her mouth to offer another suggestion, when he straightened, thumb hooked in the waistband of his drawers, and turned his full attention to her.

“That’s no’ why ye’re here, are ye, Flick?”

When he tugged at his drawers, his cock—already thickening—popped free, and her attention was drawn to it. How could she *not* look at it? It was bobbing there like it had a mind of its own, so insistent and pleasing...

She licked her lips, and watched it grow harder.

“Aye, that’s what I thought.”

There was no way she could deny it, not now.

Not ever.

She’d become addicted to Griffin Calderbank.

As he stalked toward the bed, she slowly inhaled, then straightened her legs. The coolness of the silk sheets caused her skin to pucker; or perhaps it was the predatory way he watched her. The mattress dipped as he kneeled onto it, and she had to struggle to keep from rolling toward him.

“Why are ye here, Felicity?”

His tone brooked no argument. It was a command to answer.

And yet she didn’t know how.

The destruction of her own bed was a convenient excuse, but not the *real* reason.

Felicity chewed on her lower lip as he loomed closer, gloriously naked. She wanted to touch him.

“Tell me,” Griffin growled. “Ye’re here because ye want more of me, aye? Ye want what I can give ye?”

Her attention was focused on his member, jutting hard and proud. *Cock*. She had to remember that’s what he’d called it. “I want to touch you,” she whispered.

He didn’t reply, but sat back on his heels.

Was that permission?

She decided to take it as such.

Felicity scrambled to her knees, then leaned forward to take his cock in both her hands.

It was...surprisingly heavy. And thick. And so very smooth, for something so stiff.

With Exingham, she'd been more frightened than curious, so—

No, do not think of him. This is for Griffin, for you and Griffin.

She couldn't seem to look away from her own hands. His penis rested in her palm, while the fingertips of her other hand stroked the top with feather-light touches. Her gaze darted up to meet his. He wasn't watching what she was doing, but rather staring impassively at the top of her head.

She decided to take that as permission as well.

Chewing on her lip once more, she turned her attention to the gift which had been given her. The gift of exploration, the gift of learning.

Her fingers couldn't encircle his girth, but she tried, dragging her palm and the circle of her fingers up his length. When she reached the head, she found liquid beading the tip, and she sucked in a pleased breath at the evidence of his desire. Remembering page sixty-seven of *A Harlot's Guide*, she dragged some of that liquid across the head of his cock, and when she stroked him again, he shuddered.

With one hand busy, she leaned forward slightly, just enough to reach down and use her other hand to cup his testicles. They were heavier, fuller than she expected.

Her entire experience with studying male anatomy in person had come from examining her infant son during the changing of his nappies. She'd been curious how men were built, having been denied the chance for questions during the actual creation of said infant.

She'd always suspect that study—and the subsequent visits to art museums and investigation of naughty books—had left something to be desired.

She'd been right.

Desired.

Her gaze flicked back up to his as she stroked him, hefting the weight of his ballocks, then tugging them down. His eyes closed on a choked groan, and she hoped she was doing something right.

Another bead of moisture gathered, and she suddenly wanted to know what it tasted like. Another hesitant check—his eyes were still closed. Perhaps if she bent forward just a *little* bit more, she could open her mouth like this, and her tongue could dart across his member like *this*, and...

It was salty. It was salty and sweet and not nearly enough. Her lips closed around the head of his cock, and his hips gave a mighty jerk.

“Christ, Flick,” Griffin growled, pulling away from her even as his hands reached for her sides. “Ye’re trying to finish me off?”

“Yes?” She wasn’t sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing. “I just wondered...”

“Aye, and ye want to assuage yer curiosity.” He lifted her to face the headboard. “But lass, I’ve been thinking of little else except yer sweet arse for the last two days, so I’m no’ going to let ye lick me ‘til I come. No’ when I could be inside ye.”

It was crude. It was impolite. So why did it make her so wet?

“Oh?” she breathed, as he lifted each of her hands and showed her how to hold on the thick wood of the bed. Facing the wall as she was, she couldn’t see him, which just meant his light touch on the back of her neck made her shiver with anticipation.

“Dinnae let go, do ye understand?”

His growled command, close enough to her ear she could feel his breath, made her shudder.

“Answer me.”

“Y-Yes. I will not let go.”

The way he dragged his fingertips along her spine felt complimentary. “Good lass.”

She shuddered again, this time in need.

“Spread yer knees.” He didn’t give her time to comply, but shoved his knee between hers, spreading her legs.

Felicity leaned against the headboard, her weight supported by her hands, kneeling atop the pile of pillows, her arse on display.

Her arse, and everything else.

When his hand cupped her core from behind, she *knew* she was already wet. His grunt was approving. He didn’t wait, but reached around to her front and pushed one finger into her opening, even as he leaned his long length against her.

His cock was pressed into the cleft of her arse, his chest bare against her back, and he reached around her front to cup one of her breasts as his finger began to glide lazily in and out of her core.

When he rolled a nipple between his thumb and forefinger, she gasped and arched against him.

“Ye like that, Flick?” He did it again, and chuckled when she moaned. She *felt* his laugh more than heard it, but it was a minor miracle, she supposed, and made her gasp of delight even greater.

“Tell me,” Griffin commanded.

“I like it.” Felicity gasped again when he squeezed her entire breast. “More, please.”

“God *damn*, sweetheart, ye have the most amazing tits,” he growled in her ear as a second finger joined the first inside her. “I wouldnae have believed it, the way ye’re always buttoned up so prim and proper. But look at yerself.”

Obediently, she glanced down. In the last decade, her body had grown softer, curvier. Her breasts were larger than they'd once been, and hung lower. In this position, she could see they would dangle freely, gravity pulling them toward the pillows.

But instead, he held one. She watched the way his large hand covered her breast, squeezing it like a piece of fruit. It was strangely erotic, to *see* as well as feel.

He rolled her nipple again, and her mouth fell open on a desperate need. Perhaps it was because he'd just added a third finger into her wet folds.

“Ye like that.”

It wasn't a question, but she answered it in a low moan. “*Yes.*”

“Ye want more than my fingers, Flick?”

“*Yes.*”

“As milady commands.”

His fingers slid from her, but before she could do more than inhale, his cock had replaced them.

They both groaned.

He knelt between her legs, his cock spearing upward into her, and reached forward to grasp her other breast. The dew from her desire was sticky across her nipple, and she whimpered when she realized it. The sensation of being trapped—trapped by *him*—made her pulse pound. Who would've guessed she would enjoy his rough handling?

But dear Lord in Heaven, she did.

He began to move, slowly at first. Each twitch of his hips pulled his cock in and out of her opening, just the smallest amount.

It felt...

It felt...

So.

Very.

Good.

Exhaling, Felicity allowed her head to fall back against his shoulder, which earned her a murmured, “Good lass,” and his speed increased. Thank goodness she was holding onto the headboard, because in moments, it was possibly the only thing anchoring her to this earth.

It, and him.

How could she feel so close to release in such a short amount of time?

His thrusts were deeper now, faster. *Stronger*. From this angle, Griffin was hitting something different and completely perfect...with each plunge, the tip of his cock met a spot deep inside her which had her moaning, until she was making just one long sound of need.

One of his hands dropped to her curls, as the other rose. His callused palm cupped her throat, claiming her in the most primitive way.

When the pad of his thumb found her clitoris, she gasped and hunched forward, curling around him—*all* of him.

He continued to thrust, and this angle was even better. She was all but dangling from the headboard, speared by him, again and again, and when she squeezed her eyes shut, all she saw was white light.

Then he pinched her pearl, and the light exploded into a million colors.

Her orgasm carried her higher and higher, her inner muscles squeezing, milking, desperate for *more more more more*, until she forgot to breathe.

Forgot to *be*.

She was just a floating bundle of sensations, each spasm more pleasurable than the last, each more incredible.

And he carried her, carried her farther and farther, higher than she thought possible.

Until, with a mighty roar, he pulled his cock from her and slid it along the cleft of her arse. She felt hot liquid spill onto her skin, then again, and again, and again, each pump burning her, claiming her, branding her.

Oh. My. Goodness.

Felicity sucked in a breath, trying to remember how to exist.

She hadn't expected existing to be this difficult.

Luckily, Griffin seemed more aware, more capable of rational thought. While she hung there, knuckles cramping from how hard she was holding that headboard, she felt him pull away and climb from the bed.

Before she could register his absence, he was back, a warm, damp cloth sliding between her nether lips, then along her arse. He was cleaning her.

She lifted her head, blearily watching him as he cleaned himself, then tossed the towel somewhere and turned off the lamp, plunging the room into darkness once more.

Funny, it wasn't nearly as cold as her room.

She didn't want to return there. She didn't want him to leave her, either.

But he didn't. He climbed onto the bed once more, and without saying anything, gently pried her fingers from the headboard. Perhaps he realized how tightly she'd been holding on, because he kissed each palm.

"Good lass," he murmured again, sending a spike of-of *something* through her.

Joy? Pride?

Then he tugged her against him, and the pair of them fell into the bed. When he pulled the blankets up to cover them both, she found herself praying nothing would interrupt this.

Interrupt *them*.

She could hear his heart beating. Her head was tucked up under his chin, and she marveled at how easily they fit

together.

And her thoughts from earlier today came creeping back.

Could she be happy like this? With this grumpy, commanding man? This man who held her as if she were precious, who treated her as if she were special?

How was that even a question?

She'd never considered living her life with a *man* in it, but Griffin had taught her there were some definite bonuses.

“Griffin?”

He wasn't asleep, she could tell. Still, his only response was a shifting, pulling her closer.

She swallowed, and whispered, “I have to tell you something.”

It was what she should have told him before. She wasn't certain why it was important, but it *was*.

Felicity paused, not sure if she should expect something more from him. When he said nothing, she ventured, “I—thank you. That was my first time—I mean, not my first time, but...”

“Ye have a son, Flick.”

“I have never orgasmed with another person.”

There. There, it was said.

Awkward and shameful and in her typical stilted way, but still: it was said.

Griffin had frozen, even his breathing still. Then, slowly, he pulled away just enough to stare down at her. Of course, she couldn't see, not in the dark, but she could *feel* his gaze studying her face, and she felt herself blush. Did he not believe her?

Instead, all he said was, “That's why ye wanted me to teach ye about pleasure?”

She exhaled, grateful. “Yes.”

Perhaps *he* could see in the dark, because his lips unerringly found hers.

He hadn't kissed her since he'd walked into this room; had only touched her and made her feel the kind of pleasure she hadn't thought possible.

But now he kissed her.

And it was so soft, so gentle, she felt tears pricking at the back of her eyes.

Then he pulled away, brushed a kiss across her nose, and with brusque movements, pulled her back against his chest, tucking her under his chin once more.

She listened to his heart.

Thank you, she whispered silently.

“Go to sleep, Flick,” he grunted.

And, smiling, she followed his command.

CHAPTER 17

SONUVABITCH.

Griffin stood in the center of the Duke of Peasgoode's bedchamber and scowled at the universe.

The packets from Blackrose hadn't been in the study. They hadn't been in the library—he'd spent hours in there one night, checking for secret safes or hidden doors, becoming increasingly desperate. They hadn't been in the clerks' offices or the closets with the rest of the ledgers, and Griffin's back ached just remembering how he'd had to hunch over them with the lamp handle clenched in his teeth, searching.

And now, he could confidently say, they weren't here in the Duke's chambers either.

Goddamn it.

He'd had to wait until mid-morning, when he knew Duncan would be occupied; knew it, in fact, because he'd been the one to suggest Rupert challenge the old man to a chess match. Granted, the lad was only ten, but he was a good enough chess player he'd give the Duke a contest, and "Uncle Duncan" seemed particularly fond of Griffin's son.

Perhaps they should start calling him Granda Duncan. He's certainly acting grandfatherly.

Aye, but if he was their surrogate grandfather, then he'd be Griffin's surrogate father, and he was here to betray the man's trust.

It was becoming increasingly difficult to ignore Felicity's suggestion that neither Duncan nor Ian were the traitor. What if it was neither man?

But it had to be *someone*. There was *someone* on this estate who didn't want Griffin investigating; he could feel it. Aye, the first incident might've been an accident, but the next...

He'd been livid to learn about the chandelier dropping atop Flick's bed. What if she'd been in it? Of course, she'd turned around and asked what if *he'd* been in it, but he'd scoffed. Certainly, he'd been there with her the first night, but...

And then he remembered how, the first time he'd taken Marcia riding on the impressive estate, he'd found a burr under his mare's saddle. Again, it might've been an accident—thank God he'd found it before the poor animal had bucked him off—but the coincidences were adding up.

Either Peasgoode was the most accident-prone estate, or someone was trying to get rid of Griffin.

And he was beginning to suspect it wasn't the Duke, and it wasn't Ian.

Which left...no suspects.

He dragged his hand through his hair and turned slowly in a circle, his stockinged feet making no sound on the carpet, as intended.

Ian's chambers would've been his next place to look—although he would've had to arrange a distraction for the man as well—except that idea became irrelevant when he searched these rooms. Whatever relationship the Duke and his secretary had in the eyes of the outside world, his staff here at Peasgoode knew the truth.

There were two sets of shaving gear and two toothbrushes in the bathing room; two sets of reading spectacles on the small table between the cozy set of leather chairs in front of the hearth, and both sides of the bed were slept on.

Ian Armstrong didn't have separate chambers for Griffin to search for the missing packets, because he was living *here*.

So where in the everloving fook was the evidence Griffin needed?

Perhaps Flick is right. Perhaps the letters from Blackrose are no' here because neither of them are guilty?

But he'd been too distracted by the whole her-naked-in-his-bed thing to focus on her words. He'd been too distracted by her in general, lately.

Once, distraction by an intriguing woman like Felicity Montrose could have meant his downfall. These days, he didn't seem to care much. Not because he was no longer a spy—his very presence in this room proved that wrong!—but because it was *her*.

He suspected he'd be willing to fall if it meant he could spend another minute in her arms.

Listen to yerself! Ye sound hopeless. Like a man in love.

Love? Griffin snorted softly and shook his head. Nay, he wasn't in *love*. He was just completely addicted to the feel of his cock in her cunny.

That was my first time.

He'd been her first. Not her first fook, of course, but the first to make her come.

The thought still made him inordinately proud, and he felt his cock stir in his trousers.

No' the best time for a cockstand.

Besides, he was beginning to think what he and Felicity did was something besides *fooking*. Making love?

There ye go with the L-word again. This isnae love. This is lust.

Aye, lust. That was likely it. Right?

A noise in the corridor had him jerking his head up and around.

Fook fook fook!

He should've made his escape, *then* pondered the frustration of not finding what he was looking for!

Griffin pressed his back to the wall beside the door. If it opened, he could either duck to his right behind a surprisingly large potted fern—why would someone put a plant in their bedchamber?—and hope like hell...or he could duck out behind the interloper.

His fists curled instinctively at his side, reminding him there was always another option.

Nay, he needed the reminder that whoever was coming closer was just doing his or her job, and didn't deserve to have their face knocked in or their neck broken because Griffin had forgotten the basic rules of sneaking about.

But as the footsteps passed the large double doors, Griffin found himself releasing a breath.

Deciding that the universe had given him one more opportunity to make up for his cock-up, he counted a full minute, then slowly eased the door open. Not seeing anyone in the corridor, he quickly ducked out and pulled the door shut behind him.

The trick, when you were somewhere you weren't supposed to be, was to act so confident no one would question you. So he shoved his hands in his pockets, pursed his lips as if he were ready to whistle—although not *actually* whistling, because that would be idiotic—and did an impression of a man out for a stroll along his twenty-eighth-cousin-twice-removed's corridor.

And then, turning the corner, he came face-to-face with Ian.

Fook.

“Griffin!” The man looked surprised, then delighted. Not at all the reaction of a guilty man when faced with someone sneaking near his private rooms. “I didn't expect to see you until dinner!”

Ah yes, the “family” dinners had quickly become the Duke and Ian's favorite parts of the day.

And yers, if ye're willing to stop lying to yerself.

Griffin couldn't allow his mind to linger on the reluctantly fun dinners. "I left Rupert to entertain Duncan." It wasn't an excuse, but a deflection.

And it worked, judging from Ian's fond smile. "Your lad is truly remarkable, Griffin, although I'm sure you don't need me to tell you that. He's a veritable fount of information, and Duncan very much enjoys his discussions with the lad. Did he tell you he's started to lend Rupert some of his favorite histories of the Highlands?"

Griffin didn't need to fake the wry twist of his lips. "God help us!"

But Ian shook his finger in mock sternness. "Now, now, none of that. If Duncan chooses you to be his heir, then Rupert will one day inherit Peasgoode, and thus nothing could be more important than educating the lad on its history, as well as the husbandry and land stewardship."

A few days ago, Griffin would've brushed off that statement. He knew Duncan's estate would be out of his reach after proving the man a traitor. But now...

His stomach churned at the thought that not only might the Duke of Peasgoode be innocent, he could very well want Griffin—and thus Rupert—as his heirs.

Oh, shite.

Since the older man was still watching him expectantly, Griffin managed a feeble grin. "Well, better him than me," he said weakly.

"I'm not so certain, Griffin," Ian said softly. "You might not have experience with land management, but Lord knows you can hire any number of clerks, as long as you trust them. I have plenty of recommendations—John Totwafel has been my second-in-command on the estate for about three years now—but do not doubt your own ability and intellect."

When he clasped Griffin on the shoulder, Griffin only managed not to duck out of his hold and flip him as he would an attacker.

“Come the time, come the man, right?”

Griffin blinked. “What?”

“I just mean, you are intelligent and capable, Griffin. I don’t doubt you could learn to lead Peasgoode into the next century. Now, I have a very important question for you.”

Remembering where he’d just been, Griffin stiffened. “Aye?” he growled.

“*Why* are you walking about without your shoes on?”

As Griffin’s toes flexed against the wooden floor of the corridor, his mind blanked.

“Ah...”

Well shite, now ye sound guiltier. Just make up something, fast!

“I...cannae find...my...”

Salvation came from an unexpected source. Bull rounded the corner carrying an apple in one hand and a pair of apples in the other. “Gruff! There ye are!”

“My son!” Griffin gratefully finished. “Step-son. I couldnae find him.”

Ian looked from one to the other in confusion. “And...you had to take your shoes off to find Bull?”

Bull, bless him, was quick to ascertain the situation. “Och, aye! Everyone kens it’s easier to juggle in yer stocking feet. Balance is important. Here’s those apples ye asked me to get, Gruff.”

Griffin just managed to get his hand up to catch the single fruit the lad tossed his way, and he prayed he made it look natural when he caught it. “Aye, Bull promised...” He cleared his throat. “I mean, I promised Bull I’d teach him to juggle. Apples. Which I asked him to fetch.”

“Oh, excellent!” Ian looked ready to remove his own shoes and join in, but then his face fell. “I have to meet with Totwafel to go over the finances for the old mill in the valley. So I suppose I’ll leave you to it.” His manner perked up and he

waved cheerfully to Bull, who was making a show of removing his shoes. “Good luck!”

Bull straightened to wave in return.

As Griffin watched the older man go, he said loudly for Ian’s benefit, “Now, the thing to remember is to keep yer stance wide, and yer weight balanced on the balls of yer feet. Dinnae lean forward—*aright he’s gone.*”

They both slumped in relief.

“Ye were doing a fairly good job of teaching me about something ye dinnae ken,” Bull offered with a grin. “Shall we go find an empty room so *I* can teach *ye*?”

Griffin jerked his head, then tossed the apple into the air and caught it. “Let’s go to yer chambers, they’re closest. And we can lock the door.” He didn’t want to be disturbed again.

“And ye can tell me why ye’re creeping about in stocking feet? Ye’re welcome for saving yer arse there, by the way.”

Reluctantly, a grin tugged at Griffin’s lips. “Aye, thank ye, *by the way.* I’ll tell ye all about the elephant hunt, and why it’s no’ progressing at all, and ye can help me come up with the next step.”

The look the lad shot him was close to hero-worship, and made Griffin feel better than he’d expected.

“I’M NOT sure I’ve ever seen anything as adorable as Highland coos,” sighed Marcia as she stacked her hands on the top rail of the wooden fence. “Have you?”

Felicity took a deep breath of the crisp summer air, tipping her head back so the sunshine could warm her face. They’d strolled through the gardens, past the stables, and now were admiring the idyllic meadow full of a small heard of the shaggy, red-haired beasts.

“I have to admit, they *are* quite cute. From a distance, at least.”

Marcia twisted to glance at her. “You *are* wearing your spectacles, right? They’re the cutest things I’ve ever seen!”

“Well, that is just because you have not seen a fuzzy little kitten batting at a ball of string, have you?” Smiling, Felicity stepped up beside the girl and rested her forearms on the top rail as well. “Cheeseburg was the cutest thing I had ever seen, besides Bull.”

“Was Bull an adorable baby?”

Felicity screwed up her nose, pretending to think about it. “Well, he was cute, but also smelly. I declare, if there was a patch of mud or dung to fall into, that boy could find it.”

As intended, Marcia dissolved into giggles. “Oh, thank you for this! I—I can’t wait to tease him!”

“Yes, he *has* changed a bit, has he not?” Felicity sobered slightly, considering their years apart. Her son was smart, charming, and passionate about his interests...and she was a little sad she couldn’t claim any credit in molding him to become the young man he was today.

You owe his sister a great debt, for protecting him from Exingham all these years.

With a happy sigh, Marcia hoisted herself atop the fence. As she swung her leg over, she grinned down at Felicity. “You know what’s great? *Trousers*. Look at this!” She kicked her boots back and forth against the wooden rails. “Bull might be annoying sometimes, but he knew *exactly* what kind of clothes I needed—sizes too!—and now I can climb and run and—and all sorts of things!”

“Bull *is* rather good at acquiring things, is he not?” Felicity’s lips curled wryly. “I have found it best not to ask him how. *But*”—she tapped a finger on Marcia’s knee—“I would wager you are the type of young lady who ran and climbed and did *other things* even while wearing skirts, are you not?”

Marcia grinned. “Guilty! But corsets make that stuff harder. Mrs. Mac told me I’m going to have to start wearing them soon enough, but I told her no.”

Felicity, who'd been wearing them since she was Marcia's age, shifted uncomfortably. Not because of the corset—she'd long ago become used to it—but because on some level, she agreed with the girl.

“And what did your father say to such rebellion?”

“He laughed.” When Felicity raised a brow, Marcia nodded emphatically. “He said *he* didn't want to wear a corset either, and it seemed cruel to make me wear one, just because I'm developing bosoms.”

“He said that? Bosoms?”

Marcia grinned. “Well, no, but he went like this.” She cupped her hands in front of her chest, and rolled her eyes. “So I knew what he meant.”

“I had no idea you got your sense of social rebellion from him.”

“I didn't. Papa's not a rebel, he's just...” Marcia shrugged. “He showed me how to protect myself. He told me I shouldn't have to be someone I'm not, just to impress a man.”

How utterly unlike Felicity's own father. “He is a good father,” she agreed quietly.

“When I grow up, I don't want to have to simper or primp or do other ridiculous things to get a man's attention.”

Felicity hummed. “Other ridiculous things?”

The girl leaned closer and lowered her voice. “Do you know, Bull told me some ladies *shave their hair*.” She gestured to her legs. “Why in the *world* would someone do something that ridiculous? Because men like it, that's why.”

Shaving their legs? Felicity's eyes widened. Is that what Griffin was used to? Was he disgusted by the fact her legs—and other parts—were covered by soft auburn hair? Oh dear.

“Isn't that *odd*, Flick?”

Pushing aside her worries, Felicity managed a weak smile. “I confess, it is not something I would consider. But luckily,

you have a few more years before you have to worry about attracting—or not attracting—men.”

“That’s what Papa says, too. I think he’s hoping I’ll suddenly become interested in boys, and he won’t have to have these conversations with me. But any boy who likes me is going to have to like me in trousers, because these things are bloody brilliant!”

Oh goodness, again with the language. Well, luckily, they were alone here, with none of Peasgoode’s workers near the back of the stables. Or Rupert.

“Did your father approve of your recent betrousering?” she asked.

Marcia grinned. “No, not really. I didn’t let that stop me.”

“I can see that,” Felicity agreed wryly.

The girl let out a heavy sigh and kicked her booted heels against the wood. “It’s fabulous to be able to run and jump and climb. Don’t you wish *you* could do all those things? The things boys do all the time, without being told they’re unladylike?”

Felicity cocked her head to one side, considering her response as they watched the cattle in the meadow. “I think... I never was jealous of the boys—like my brother—who could do all those sorts of things. I *was* jealous of the men who could study their passions at university, and be accepted in the scientific world without having to fight for every paper published, or—even worse!—have to privately approach other researchers with their advancements, just because no one would take them seriously if they announced it publicly.”

The girl was watching her with a serious expression.

Felicity shook her head. “I am making a mess of the explanation. I suppose I should say *yes*, I have, at points in my life, deeply regretted not being born a male, with all the rights and privileges they seem to take for granted. But I am also, at times, quite happy to be a female.”

“Why?” Marcia asked quietly. “I mean, when?”

“When I held Bull for the first time,” Felicity said with a small smile, remembering the tiny, squirming infant who seemed so *angry* at the world, and didn’t look anything like her. “And when your father kisses me.”

Marcia fell off the fence.

“Oh! Marcia! Sweetheart, are you hurt?” Felicity threw herself down beside the stunned girl. “Talk to me!”

“I’m not hurt.” The girl swatted away her probing hands. “You and Papa *kiss*?”

Felicity realized a blush was creeping up her neck. *Blast*. Had she said that out loud? She hadn’t *meant* to admit how much she liked Griffin’s kisses—not to his daughter, at least.

Thank goodness you did not mention the other things her father does which make you pleased you are a woman!

Marcia was now sitting up, her weight resting on her palms, her be-trousered legs sticking out straight. Her eyes were wide, and Felicity realized she couldn’t get out of answering the question.

“Um...yes.” Her gaze darted toward the stables, desperate for something to look at besides the curious girl before her. “That is part of the deception, is it not? Pretending we are married?”

To her surprise, the girl looked...*excited* at the thought of Felicity kissing her father. “That’s brilliant! The Duke will *have* to believe you’re married now! Maybe you ought to ask Papa to do a bit more than kissing, eh? To make it more believable, eh?”

When she started winking, Felicity groaned and dropped her head into her hands. “You are beginning to sound like Mrs. Mac,” she mumbled.

“Where do you think I learned it, eh?” Marcia sounded far too cheerful for someone who’d just fallen off a fence.

Before Felicity could admit that *yes*, she had asked the girl’s father for far more than kisses, and *yes*, she had enjoyed it very much, Marcia gasped in delight.

“Oh! Oh, Flick, look!” Her voice was hushed, and the tone excited enough for Felicity to peek through her fingers.

There, sniffing around the hem of her green skirts, was a tiny kitten. It was a ball of pale fluff, with a squashed face with black markings which made it look as if it were perpetually frowning.

“Hello there,” she whispered, instinctively holding out her hand so the kitten could sniff it.

“Don’t scare it away,” Marcia warned. “It’s even cuter than the coos!”

Felicity’s attention was focused on the small kitten, which was curious enough to step delicately across the silk of her skirts to sniff at the fingers being offered. “I told you so,” she muttered to the girl. “Kittens are cuter.”

“Can we keep him?” Marcia breathed.

At that moment, the kitten climbed up into Felicity’s lap, padded in a full circle, and settled back, staring expectantly up at Felicity.

When she raised her hand to stroke the wee beastie, it didn’t pull away. It seemed expectant, even with the markings which made it look irritated.

“I think...I think we might,” she murmured, stroking the little fluff ball. “Do you have any food?”

“You know what *else* trousers are great for?” Marcia asked excitedly as she shifted to one side. “Pockets! I brought this as a snack.”

It was a sandwich. She’d made and wrapped a bacon sandwich—goodness knows what the servants in the kitchen thought of her helping herself—and shoved it in her pocket.

Felicity’s brows rose wryly as she took the wrapped snack from the girl and broke off a piece for the kitten, who seemed grateful.

“What can we name it?” the girl asked.

Felicity studied the animal, wondering if the Duke would object to them bringing home a pet. Presumably the kitten was from the stables—making it Duncan’s property, she guessed—but it was so friendly, and seemed so grateful for the food...

“I think we should name him after his markings,” Marcia declared. “He looks like he’s frowning all the time!”

“Yes, he does. How about Griffin?”

Marcia burst into laughter, which startled the kitten, but it didn’t do anything more than freeze and stare owlshly at the girl, then settle back to eating small pieces of bacon from Felicity’s fingers.

“I think, Flick, that naming him after Papa might get confusing. How about Grumpy?”

“Grumpy Cat,” Felicity repeated. “I think that is a perfect name. Let us get him cleaned up.”

She met the eyes of her not-quite-step-daughter, and they both grinned in excitement.

CHAPTER 18

GRIFFIN'S first sign of the attacker was the opening of the door. After the accidents of the last few days—he still wasn't certain if they were merely accidents, or something more sinister—he should've been on his guard, but he thought he was safe, here in his room. But then the door opened.

He was concentrating on the small, bean-filled sacks arcing through the air, and saw the swish of Felicity's skirts out of the corner of his eye as she entered.

So he assumed he was safe.

But the small streak of angry gray hurled itself, yowling, across the room.

Griffin barely had time to glance down before the sopping wet *thing* leaped at his knees, tiny claws digging into his trousers and the skin beneath, then climbed him like a-a—well, rather like a cat climbing a tree.

Two of the sacks safely returned to his open palms, while the third landed, forgotten, between his bare feet, as the *thing* scampered up his waistcoat only to freeze. Griffin tucked his chin and peered downward at the tiny gremlin who clung desperately to his shirt front.

“The fook is this?” he growled.

Across the room, Felicity was already giggling. She peeled off her jacket and tossed it across the bureau. “*This*, my bogus husband, is Grumpy.”

Griffin frowned down at the creature. It was a cat—kitten?—he was ninety-five percent certain of that. But the damned thing had fallen into a rain barrel or something, because its fur was sticking to its skinny frame, while its head was about eight times too large for its body.

But, aye, it *was* frowning up at him. Or at least, the markings around its face made it seem that way.

“Why does it look like a gremlin?”

Still chuckling, Felicity strolled across the room at a pace—as far as Griffin was concerned, what with the cat hanging off his nipples—far too sedate. “Marcia and I gave him a bath. Come along, baby. Come to mama,” she crooned as she stepped closer and tried to peel the cat’s claws from Griffin’s chest.

Griffin, standing there with his hands still holding his sacks, stifled his sigh and focused his attention on the top of her bent head. “Ye bathed the damned thing?”

“We found him in the stable. Or rather outside the stable. Come, dearest, let go of your papa.”

“I’m *no*’ the thing’s papa.” Her hair had escaped its normal bun, stray locks flying about her head. She looked as if she’d been in a battle, but *damn* she smelled good. “Why do yer animals always latch on to me?”

Without looking up—she’d managed to disengage two of the creature’s legs and was trying to turn its attention to her—Felicity murmured, “Because cats have a sixth sense.”

He harumphed, standing as still as possible, trying not to notice the alluring way she chewed on her lower lip. Bloody difficult, with her so close. “What the hell does sensing earthquakes got to do with *me*?”

Green eyes peeked upward for a moment, and he could swear there was mirth behind her spectacles.

Then Felicity focused once more on the gremlin. “Not earthquakes, Griffin. A cat’s sixth sense is the well-known ability to find the human in the room who dislikes them, or whom they make sneeze. Then they suddenly become that

human's best friend, rubbing up against him or her, or possibly sitting in their lap. They are also remarkably good at finding full containers of liquid, such as teacups, often going far out of their way in order to accidentally brush up against one and knock it to the floor—*there* we are, little one!”

Triumphantly, Felicity stepped back, cradling the wet mess to her chest as she beamed up at Griffin. “Grumpy did not hurt you too much, did he?”

Scowling, Griffin tossed one of the sacks to the opposite hand, then rubbed his chest. No blood, good. “Did ye really trap a barn cat and drag it into the house to *bathe* it? I thought cats hated water?”

“It was not the easiest of endeavors. Marcia is having to change right now. Hold out that towel, please?”

Griffin obliged, scooping up the towel one of the maids had laid out for the bathing room. But instead of taking it from him, Felicity shoved the cat into his hands. Instinctively, he clamped them shut, trapping the animal within the towel.

“There we are,” she crooned, stepping close once more to rub the now-docile animal with the towel. “What a good little lad.”

She's no' talking to ye, he told his cock.

His cock didn't listen.

This close, he could see the large wet splotch across the top of her chest, making her white linen blouse—and the chemise under it—translucent. Her hair's disarray made sense now; between that and the fact her spectacles were slightly askew, and the patches of dirt and water on her skirts, it was obvious the kitten hadn't approved of a bath.

“And he is not a *barn cat*,” she was saying, more to the animal than to Griffin. “Marcia and I were discussing—well, it matters not. This adorable beastie ran up to us, crawled into our laps, and decided we were his new family.”

“And I suppose the Duke is going to welcome this new flea-carrier in his home?”

She clucked dismissively as she continued to dry the cat. “Do not listen to him, Grumpy Cat. You do not have fleas! And Mrs. Bobo *assured* me His Grace will welcome you.”

“Really?” Griffin realized he was trying not to smile.

Felicity peeked up at him, her own lips twitching. “She was rather enamored of the wee beastie.”

Griffin stared. *Christ*, she was beautiful, with that sparkle in her eye and the way her lower lips seemed so damned plump. Her cheeks were pink from the sunshine and her recent excitement, and she smelled like honey and berries and all the best things in the world.

He wanted her.

He *always* wanted her.

He suspected he always would.

This is a mission. Fer yer elephant hunt, dinnae forget that. It's the only reason she's pretending to be married to ye.

No other man had made her come. No other man had brought her pleasure.

Except *him*.

That fierce pride had kept him awake last night.

He'd been her first. He wanted to be her only.

Shite.

Here he stood, barefoot in the Duke of Peasgoode's house, having not a single fooking idea where the evidence they needed was...and he was thinking about kissing Felicity, instead of the mission.

That, and the cat in his hands.

“There, little one,” she announced in satisfaction, pulling off the towel and proudly presenting the cat to Griffin. “Does he not look handsome?”

The gremlin was dry, and looked decidedly less gremlin-like. In fact, with that hair poofing out all over him, and those

markings which looked like eyebrows, he looked...almost adorable.

Griffin wasn't going to admit that, though. "He looks angry."

"Aye," Felicity quipped, snuggling the animal under his chin. "That is why we named him after ye."

Griffin's chuckles caught him by surprise.

Caught *Felicity* by surprise too, judging from the way her eyes widened. "Good heavens, Griffin, are you ill?"

But since she was smirking as she said it, he decided to ignore her teasing. "What are ye going to do with the newest addition to yer menagerie?"

"Grumpy's home..." She sighed, then rubbed her chin over the animal's fur. "Grumpy's home is Peasgoode. I am delighted Mrs. Bobo already loves him, because I know *someone* will care for him after—after we are gone." She swallowed and turned away. "In fact, I only offered to dry him off; I am certain the dear woman is waiting for him to return. She was going to make him a wee bed in the kitchens."

There was sadness in her tone, aye, but acceptance too, as she crossed to the door.

She's starting to sound like she belongs at Peasgoode.

It was a beautiful estate, and Griffin couldn't deny his children loved it here, too. But they were here because of a lie, and that lie *had* to continue until he found the evidence he needed to link the Duke with Blackrose.

And then one day, bring the bastard to justice.

Felicity had opened the door. "Oh, there you are! Yes, here he is, the little charmer." A pause, then a chuckle. "No, Griffin was none too pleased, as we had guessed, but he is Grumpy's favorite, as we also guessed." Another cheerful twitter, which sounded forced. "No need to send a maid, I am certain my husband can help me change out of these wet things. Yes, thank you. I will be down to visit the beastie later."

When she shut the door, sans cat, she seemed...lesser, somehow. Was the strain of all these lies getting to her?

Griffin's hand delved into the pocket of his trousers, and closed around the sack he'd been practicing with. The thought of causing her sadness was...unacceptable. "Come here," he commanded, unable to keep the gruffness from his tone.

When she stopped in front of him, her expression curious, his eyes were drawn yet again to the sheerness of her blouse. He liked that—despite being a lady—she'd never been one to put on airs or flounce about in fancy gowns. Perhaps it was because she was a decade older than the debutantes making their curtsies, and had time to realize she was more comfortable in simple blouses and skirts.

Or perhaps she'd always been the practical sort. His fingers rose to her buttons.

"What are you doing?" she breathed.

He ignored her, concentrating on his work. But his gaze was drawn to the hollow at the base of her throat where her pulse beat rapidly. Was that fear? Or excitement?

"Griffin?" Her hand rose to cover his. "What are you doing?"

"I'm undressing my wife," he growled. "Ye'll catch yer death in this wet shirt."

"I...It is the middle of summer."

"Aye, and the Highlands are cold." He reached the bottom of the buttons and pushed open the two sides of the blouse. Beneath it, her corset beckoned, her chemise underneath. "Shouldnae have allowed a wet pussy to make ye so uncomfortable."

She whimpered.

Griffin smiled, his fingers already working on her corset hooks.

As the corset fell away, he allowed the backs of his knuckles to brush along the valley between her breasts. They

were covered by the chemise, aye, but the linen was already thin, and now it was wet.

Under his gaze, her nipples slowly hardened, and his grin grew.

“Griffin?” Felicity’s whisper sounded hoarse.

Christ, he wanted her. His cock throbbed against the front of his trousers, urging him to bend his head, to take her tit in his mouth. To lick, to worship.

To show her he could make her happy, now and tomorrow and next year and forever.

Forever? Fook me.

He forced his gaze—and his touch—upward. “Ye’re going to miss Grumpy when we leave.” It wasn’t really a question, just all he could think of to say. His fingers were on her jaw, then her cheek, then her brow, brushing a curl back. He couldn’t seem to stop touching her. “I’m sorry.”

“I...” Her hands rose to his chest, her fingers curling around the lapels of his waistcoat. “I will. I do.”

Was she still talking about the cat?

Griffin stared into her eyes, which fluttered across his countenance as if looking for purchase. Was it his imagination, or was there desperation there?

His scarred knuckles dragged along her jawline. “Flick,” he whispered.

That was it. That was enough.

With another muffled whimper, she threw herself forward as she pulled him down, capturing his lips with hers. This kiss was hot and desperate, the damp linen pinned between them, and Griffin felt his lips curl under hers.

Then she was forcing him backward, and he was happy to go. When the back of his legs bumped against the edge of a chair, he sat down—hard—and pulled her after him. She ended up in his lap.

Only then did she break the kiss and pull back, panting, as she stared in confusion.

He had one hand pressed against the small of her back, and the other rose to her throat. He dragged two callused fingertips to her collarbone and loved the way she shuddered. Nay, he loved the way his body *reacted* to that shudder; his cock was straining against his trousers, begging for release.

Christ, this woman.

This woman would end him.

And he'd go happily.

"Flick," he murmured again, his gaze on that delicious lower lip.

She swallowed. "Make love to me again, Griffin." When his eyes darted up to meet hers, the green orbs were obscured by a sheen of tears. "Please?"

Why was she crying?

Griffin carefully removed her spectacles, knowing Felicity could see him well enough without them. Without releasing her, he folded them one-handed and placed them on the small table beside his chair. Then he lifted her by the waist, kicking her skirts out of the way and resettling her.

Now she straddled his thighs, and there were no more tears in her eyes.

"Ye dinnae need to beg, Flick," he said gruffly, pulling her closer so the junction of her thighs sat tantalizingly close to his throbbing cockstand. "That was part of our bargain, aye?"

It was the wrong thing to say, judging from the way her expression fell a bit, and he cursed silently. Then he cursed out loud, and pulled her lips down to his once more.

Where the last kiss was hot and desperate, this was one slow and cajoling. He teased her into opening beneath his onslaught, his tongue playing and his teeth nipping until she gave a little mewl which sounded like one of her kittens and linked her hands around his neck.

Aye, that's it.

Now that she was situated right where she should be, he was able to lift both hands to her tits, cupping them through the wet, damp linen. When his thumbs found her nipples, she whimpered again.

He squeezed, and she gasped against his mouth and arched into his touch.

So she likes things a bit rougher.

Good to know.

He rolled her erect nipples between his thumb and forefinger, then tightened his hold on the left one. She whimpered again and bit his lower lip.

And he liked things a bit rougher.

God, they were made for each other.

A chuckle built in his chest. "Good girl," he murmured as he pulled his mouth from hers and lowered it. "Good lass."

His lips traced her throat, her collarbone...then Griffin lifted her left breast to his mouth. As he lavished love on her nipple, he grazed his teeth across her sensitive skin and she bucked atop him.

He'd heard that once a woman nursed a child, the sensitivity of her breasts could change. He wondered if Felicity had nursed her son.

He wondered how she'd ended up in the Duke of Exingham's bed, and why he hadn't realized the treasure she was.

He wondered why no man had thought to teach this intriguing, adorable, caring woman the meaning of pleasure.

That just means she's yers.

He growled possessively and switched his mouth to her other breast. She *was* his. He'd ensured it. They might not be married in law, but she was his.

And, he was beginning to suspect, he was hers.

Felicity's fingers curled in his hair, holding him against her, while her other hand dropped between their bodies, frantically pulling and tugging her skirts out of the way.

His woman was desperate for his touch, was she?

Well, he could help with that.

With the material of her skirts out of the way, he reached between her legs and grasped each of her upper thighs. Her bloomers were split, thank fook, and his thumbs rested on either side of her curls.

"Flick," he murmured, against her skin.

"Yes!" she gasped, rocking forward.

He needed no other permission, his thumbs pulled apart her lips. He couldn't see her weeping core but he could feel it. Holy Christ, he could feel it. With a muttered curse, he dragged the pad of one thumb along her cleft, then found her clitoris.

She damn near came off his lap.

The sound she made was half-desperation, half-anger, and she fumbled for his trouser buttons. He was happy to sit back and allow her to release his aching cock, and when she took it in her slender fingers, his breath hissed from between his teeth.

She stroked him, the angle awkward, as Griffin continued to tease the bud of her pleasure. But when she reached the head of his cock, she swiped her thumb across the bead of pre-cum and lifted it to her tongue...and he bloody well lost his mind.

With a growl, he moved his hands to her waist, lifting her once more. She was as eager as he was, and angled his cock for the easiest penetration.

As she lowered herself atop it, they both exhaled.

It was like coming home.

He opened his eyes and met hers.

Good Christ Almighty, she was staring into his soul.

Griffin raised his hands to cup her jaw, his thumbs brushing along her cheeks. “Felicity,” he murmured. She felt so good, so right. It was all he could manage. “*Felicity.*”

“Yes.”

It was all she said. It was all she needed to say.

She shifted her weight to her knees, tucked at his side, pulling his cock from her tight, warm core. When she sat back down, they both groaned.

Her movements were incremental, but so very right. He held as still as he could, allowing her to take the lead, to move the way she wanted. Instead of thrusting, her hips were rotating, making small circles as she came down atop him again and again.

It was, he decided, the most fooking erotic thing he’d ever seen.

Felt.

Experienced.

This angle meant his cock was fully encased, upright, its tip brushing against the spot inside her, right behind her clitoris, which seemed to drive her mad. Each time Felicity was fully seated upon him, she sucked in a breath. As her movements became faster and faster, more and more desperate, those breaths turned into pants, which turned into keens.

And Griffin resisted the urge to shut his eyes at the unimaginable torture. His ballocks ached with the need to thrust into her, to claim her. But he wanted her to have the power here, wanted her to claim *him*.

He was so very, very close.

Then she sank down hard, forcing his cock so deep inside her he thought he might be touching her womb, and she froze. He saw her eyes widen, then squeeze shut. And as her inner muscles tightened around him, he grinned.

“Aye, that’s the way, lass,” he murmured.

But as her core spasmed around him, she leaned forward and claimed his lips—

Christ.

He came.

He came *hard*.

His orgasm startled a gasp out of him, and he clutched her tighter, as her core milked his cock for all it was worth.

Dimly, he was aware he hadn't pulled out, hadn't taken precautions against filling her with his seed. And he was fooking *proud*, by God.

Now she was his.

No argument.

It seemed like forever before Griffin ceased jerking against her, before he could open his eyes—eyes he hadn't even realized he'd closed—to find her watching him.

Watching him with tears in her eyes.

His heart skipped a beat. “Christ, Flick, what is it?” His thumbs caught the teardrops which rolled down her cheeks. “Did I hurt ye? I'm sorry, I—tell me ye're no' hurt? God, *fook*, I'm sorry, I'm sorry.”

His palms were squeezing her cheeks, but she managed to smile. And it wasn't a smile *despite* the tears, it was... something else. Something joyful.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

How was he supposed to answer that? His gaze darted between her eyes, looking for the truth, horrified she might be hurt.

But she leaned forward to brush her lips against his, and he felt his cock stirring again, deep inside her. “Thank you,” she breathed again, against his skin.

She was *thanking* him for spending inside her? Or for showing her pleasure once more?

With a helpless growl, he crushed her against him.

Christ, he would spend the rest of his life showing her pleasure, if that's what she wanted. Because he was enjoying it just as much as she was.

And in that moment of clarity, Griffin realized two things:

One, Peasgoode be damned, he wanted to marry Felicity Montrose for *real*.

And two, there was no fooking way he could, until this mission was completed.

CHAPTER 19

FELICITY'S BODY felt as if she was floating; not quite present, but at the same time, very much aware of the man who held her. She could feel his strong hand splayed across her back, feel his thumb on her cheek, feel his heart pounding near her ear.

Feel *him* deep inside.

The mammalian male sports a protrusible copulatory organ.

She remembered reading that, several years after she'd been forced to give up her son. By then, of course, she'd experimented and explored, and understood more about her own body. She'd also remembered exactly *how* a male could use his protrusible copulatory organ.

She'd read that and had realized sex, between humans, was nothing more than a biological urge to propagate the species. After all, that's what had happened between her younger self and Exingham, even if it hadn't been the man's intent.

Yes, sex was merely a biological urge, and human bodies had evolved to make it feel good, so they'd *want* to continue doing it. Felicity had learned that she could replicate those good feelings in a small way with her own fingers—or the occasional long and slender device—and had no need to involve a male and his organ.

But...

But Griffin had taught her she was wrong.

That's what science was about; experimenting and correcting previous incorrect assumptions.

And this one? This one had been *huge*.

Because what Felicity was feeling right now had nothing to do with biological urges or logic, and everything to do with her heart.

What she'd just shared with Griffin was *important*. Even better than what he'd taught her during their previous nights together.

Perhaps it had to do with the way it had ended.

He'd spent inside of her.

After her experience with Exingham, it should have frightened her. She wasn't married to Griffin; she had no claim to the man. If, by some miracle of coincidence, this ended with her pregnant, she should be horrified.

But...she wasn't.

Because Griffin had stayed with her. He'd spent inside her, he'd given part of himself to her.

And *that* had been the real miracle.

He stirred, and as he did, his softened cock slipped from her lubricated opening. Goodness, they'd certainly made a mess, hadn't they?

Before she could consider that, Griffin was straightening, forcing her upright again. His hand still cupped her cheek possessively, the pad of his thumb brushing back and forth against her damp skin. She'd cried, hadn't she?

Well, who could blame her? That had been *stunning*.

The freedom he'd given her, the control...she never imagined having sex could be like that. No, no: *making love*.

Because that? That had most certainly been making love.

Griffin said nothing, just stared into her eyes, his expression unreadable. She waited for him to frown, growl,

and wondered if *she* should be the one to break the silence. But she didn't.

And after a long moment, he exhaled—was that a sigh?—and dropped his hand from her cheek.

By the time she realized his intent, his arm was already under one of her knees, and she *tried* to help him by standing up, but instead of allowing it, he twisted and scooped up her other leg as well. She barely had time to suck in a breath before she was lifted into the air, instinctively throwing her arms around his shoulders to hold herself in place.

“Griffin?” she managed to squeak as he strode toward the door to the bathing chamber.

He didn't answer, but in a moment had settled her on the ledge of the large bathtub, and was now fiddling with the faucets. When he was satisfied with the temperature of the water filling the tub, he stepped back to her side and gestured for her to stand.

Bemused, Felicity did, and he went to work on the hooks on her skirt.

“*Griffin*. I can undress myself.”

Without looking up, he muttered, “Ye can likely wash yerself too. I'm still going to do it, though.”

Oh.

When he untied her petticoat, it and the skirt fell around her feet. He gestured to her to lift her arms. Instead, she shook her head and grabbed the hem of her chemise. “I can do it.”

It was really quite liberating to pull the chemise over her head so boldly, but he'd dropped to one knee to remove her stockings and shoes, and hadn't noticed. But then he was upright once more, pulling down her drawers in an efficient manner, and lifting her.

And Felicity was trying her hardest not to be embarrassed, but it was *hard*. She burrowed her face in his shoulder and hoped she wasn't leaking awkwardly from between her thighs.

If she was, it was his fault, anyway.

“Ye ken, ye’re going to have to look at me *sometime*.” Griffin sounded amused. “I had nae idea ye were so shy.”

“I am not shy,” she mumbled against his skin. “I am just... uncertain. I do not like being uncertain.”

“Aye, I figured that out about ye. It’s why ye wanted to experiment with me, aye?” He shifted, bouncing her a little so she was higher in his arms. “But there’s nothing to be uncertain about, Flick. Just relax and let me take care of ye, aright?”

Relax? Impossible.

“I really do not need you to—” The rest of her objection was cut off as he suddenly stepped forward and lowered her into the water.

The heat caused her to yelp as her bottom was submerged, but the sound turned to a sigh as he propped her against the back of the tub with the water surrounding her tense muscles. “Oh, that is *nice*.”

Chuckling, Griffin stepped back and began to unbutton his waistcoat.

Since the steam from the tub had likely already pinkened her skin, Felicity didn’t see any harm in watching him undress. Goodness, here she was completely naked, and the man was fully dressed, except for his shoes.

They’d been too desperate for one another to notice that, earlier, and the realization made her smirk a little.

“Why do ye object to me caring for ye, Flick?”

It seemed like an innocuous question, so she shrugged as she reached to turn off the taps. “I am...not used to being cared for.”

“That doesnae mean ye cannae allow it.”

Didn’t it? “I do not know how,” Felicity admitted quietly, fiddling with the faucet, although it was already turned off. It was easier than looking at him, now.

“Ye take care of everyone else.”

From the corner of her eye, she saw the waistcoat land in the corner, then Griffin shrugged out of his shirt.

“I...” Her mouth was suddenly dry, her stomach tight. Why was she nervous? “I do not take care of everyone. I do not take care of *anyone*.” Her gaze and her voice dropped. “I want to,” she admitted, “But there was not anyone...”

He stepped into her line of vision. “Ye’ve been taking care of all of us since this deception started. Rupert thinks ye’re amazing for being willing to ask and answer questions, and Marcia loves ye for accepting her so readily.”

Of *course* she accepted his children for who they were. It was one of the things she’d admired about Griffin from the beginning; he was willing to allow his children to take their own paths in life, instead of imposing his goals on them.

But that felt too complicated to admit, right now. So she merely murmured, “They are wonderful children.”

“Aye, and so is Bull.”

Griffin’s trousers hit the ground and he kicked them off. Her gaze was drawn helplessly to his movements as he yanked off his socks and then his smalls, until he stood beside the tub, as naked as she was.

His cock hung, half-engorged already, against a thick patch of dark hair. She wanted to reach for it, to stroke it.

To taste it.

Her mouth watered at the thought.

Griffin seemed oblivious to her line of thinking. “Budge up, I’m coming in,” he announced, then continued his earlier thought. “Ye take care of Bull.”

She scooted forward in the tub, glad she’d turned off the faucets as he climbed in behind her and the water level rose.

It was distracting.

“I—I do not really take care of him. He is mostly grown. He does not need me.”

Bull was already his own person, no thanks to her.

“I think he does.” Griffin grunted, lowering himself to sit behind her and settling back. “He’s a good lad—no’ entirely the little shite I thought he was.”

“Thank you,” she said drily, staring ahead, waiting for him to get comfortable.

“Nay, I didnae mean it like that. I—”

“I understand.” She *did*. “You were worried for your family, and thought Bull was a threat to them. He is not.”

“I ken that now.” Griffin’s hand closed around her shoulders and he pulled her back carefully. “He’s...taught me a lot.”

She knew she had no right to be proud of the young man her son had turned into, but that didn’t stop the burst of delight in her chest. “He likes you very much, Griffin. I know his teasing might not seem like that, but he *does*. I think...” She swallowed, holding herself stiffly. “I think he needs you—I mean, needs someone like you in his life.”

Griffin didn’t say anything for a long moment, then took a deep breath. “I’m coming to realize I wouldnae hate—nay, that’s no’ right. I would *like* that. To be in his life. To help him grow.”

Oh.

Suddenly, one of his fingers jabbed into her shoulder. “Want to see something? Sit forward again.”

Intrigued, Felicity *did* lean forward, but then she shifted so her back was to the side of the tub and she could pull her knees up to her chest and wrap her arms around them. From this angle, it was possible for Griffin to lever himself over the edge so he could stretch for his trousers.

Seeing his arse waving about in the air made it necessary to stifle her giggles which echoed about the room.

“Got it!” he grunted triumphantly as his questing fingers snagged the edge of the fabric. He dragged the trousers toward the tub as he settled back, then dug into one of the pockets. “Here!”

He held up one of the little pouches he'd been throwing from hand to hand when Grumpy Cat had surprised him earlier.

Since he was holding it out expectantly, Felicity allowed her grin to show as she took it from him. "What is it?" she asked, turning it this way and that. The thing appeared to be a small bag, filled with something like beans or rice, then sewn shut.

"Those are my ball-sacks," he declared proudly.

She managed not to snicker.

With a wounded *harumph*, Griffin plucked it from her hand. "I *meant*, Bull told me it's easier to learn to juggle with weighted sacks, instead of balls. But that's no' what I wanted to show ye. Look at this stitching!"

He angled the pouch toward her, but Felicity's fingers were now pressed to her lips, in an effort to hide her smile. "Bull is teaching you to juggle?"

"Well, aye," he huffed. "Thanks to their lies, I'm just waiting for Peasgoode to jump out from around a corner and demand I give him a demonstration."

"He's in a wheeled chair, it would make the jumping—"

"Shush." He mock-glared, then shoved the ball-sack under her nose. "*Look* at that seam! His stitches are neater than Marcia's!"

"Yes," she agreed drily as she took it from him to examine. "But I have seen Marcia's stitching, so I am not surprised. I suspect even *my* stitches are better than hers."

Bull was good with his hands, his fingers were constantly moving. He'd taken his talent for pickpocketing and turned it toward knitting and stitching, and even a few attempts at tating lace.

"Duly noted." He scooped up a bar of soap and began to lather up a cloth. "My point is, the lad is full of interesting talents. Ye should be commended for allowing him to follow his own path."

Just what she'd been thinking about Griffin. But the reminder soured her cheer, and she gently tossed the pouch toward the discarded clothing on the floor. "Sadly, I cannot take credit for his skills."

Griffin grunted softly and ran the cloth over his shoulder and arm. His attention seemed to be focused on his task when he said, "Ye dinnae have to teach him to be proud of him."

"Perhaps." Her head tipped back to *thud* gently against the tile. "Sometimes I do see parts of myself in him. Sometimes."

He continued to wash himself with sure, economical movements. "I see ye in his mannerisms. His caring heart. He has yer eyes."

Her breath caught at his casual compliment, and now it seemed instinctual to blurt, "No, he does not."

"Aye. No' the color, but the way he looks at things. Passionately. There's a curiosity for the world in his gaze." Before she could do more than gawk at his poetic phrase, he shrugged and reached for the soap again. "He's got yer smile, too."

She gaped at him. "I think...that might be the nicest thing you have ever said to me."

"Really?" His grin was lightning-fast. "Then I should try harder."

Who *was* this charmer?

Griffin reached for her hand, and she placed it in his without thinking. The tub was cramped, but he tugged, and she twisted to unfold herself. A gentle pressure on her shoulder, and she leaned back, resting against his chest. The water threatened to slosh over the edge.

He still held her hand. Now, his arm framing her smaller one, he lifted it and used his other hand to drag the washcloth over her skin. The movements were slow, lazy.

Sensual.

She bit her lip.

He dragged the cloth up her other arm to her shoulder, rubbing the sweet-smelling lather into her skin. Without quite meaning to, she allowed her head to drop to one side, against his shoulder behind her, his touch lulling her into a sort of daze.

Surprisingly, he paid less attention to her breasts than she'd expected, merely washing them, then her stomach, then dipping between her legs to clean her there. It was intimate and should have been embarrassing, but...with Griffin, it wasn't.

After several minutes of silence, the only sound the lapping of the water against the tile, or his breath in her ear, Griffin hummed. "Will ye tell me about him, Flick?"

Her eyes were closed, her focus on the sensation of his touch. "Who? Bull?"

"Bull's father. He told me it was the Duke of Exingham."

Felicity's eyes shot open and she felt herself stiffen.

He must've felt it too, judging by the way he cursed under his breath and tossed aside the cloth. "Nevermind. I shouldnae have asked."

"No—*no*. You have every right to know."

"I dinnae." To her surprise, he wrapped his arms around her waist and linked his fingers together, then pulled her snug against him. "It's yer past, Flick, and I dinnae want ye to feel ye must—"

"I want to tell you," she interrupted, placing her fingers atop his, under the water. Here she was, nestled in a man's arms in the bath. She *never* would have imagined such liberties, such *ease*, before Griffin. "Besides, it is not a secret. Exingham himself would have bragged to you about it, if you had asked."

"*Fook*."

"He was not a very nice man. I confess I did not even say a prayer for his soul when I heard he had died, and his son took the title."

His hold tightened, and she could feel his heart pounding against her back. “Did he hurt ye?”

“Cheerfully.” When he sucked in a breath, Felicity hurried to say, “Shall we change the subject? I met Ian’s second-in-command yesterday, did I tell you that? His name is John Totwafel, and I confess I could not concentrate on a thing the man was saying, because I could not stop staring at his hair. I feel rude to even point it out, but the man had the most remarkable head of hair—honest to goodness, it was *orange*, with wiry curls—”

Her words were cut off with a squeak when he suddenly hauled her to her feet.

Well, technically, it was a bit more complicated than that, what with the fact he was reclining behind her, and they were in a tub, and whatnot. But the end result was they were both standing, she was still in his arms, and at least half the water ended up on the floor.

And before she could ask him his intent, he’d stepped out of the tub, turned, and picked her up.

“Griffin?” she asked hesitantly. “What are you—”

“We’re done with the bath.”

“Really?” Disappointment lent a bit of a pout to her tone. “I thought we might linger a bit longer.”

“Grab those towels,” he commanded, turning her toward the shelf. “Did ye think I was going to make love to ye again in there?”

Two soft towels landed in her lap. “Well, actually, yes, I imagined so, what with the breast-fondling—”

“I’ll fondle yer breasts on dry land. I dinnae ken where ye get yer ideas—fooking in the bathtub? It’s awkward and slippery and dangerous. Likely unhygienic too,” he grumbled as he allowed her to slide to stand on her own two feet. “Nonsense.”

It hadn’t seemed nonsense to *her*, but Felicity forgot to say so when he began drying her.

He wasn't exactly gentle, his movements brisk and efficient. He paid particular attention to her torso.

"I can dry myself, Griffin."

"Aye, but then I cannae practice my breast fondling."

She sucked in a surprised breath as he did just that, and he was still grinning wickedly as he spun her about, wrapped the towel around her, and tucked it in. Next thing she knew, he was settling onto the same chair he'd fallen into earlier, and she was sitting in his lap.

Again.

Only this time her ankles were crossed, and it seemed far less desperate. In fact, his hand settled atop her knee, and his strong arm at her back made her feel...safe? Comforted?

He is taking care of you. Just as he said he would.

Oh.

Oh my.

Be still, my heart.

Griffin tugged her head to rest against his shoulder, then cleared his throat. "Flick, ye dinnae have to talk about anything that makes ye uncomfortable, but I want ye to ken I will never hurt ye, no' the way he did."

She blew out a breath, then snuggled closer. "I know," she whispered. But... "It really is not a secret, Griffin. Well, the way he treated me was, perhaps. But the rest of it..."

He waited a moment, then asked hesitantly, "Will ye tell me?"

There was no reason not to, and he *was* pretending to be her husband...

"My father was a baron, very proud of himself and his lineage. My brother was the perfect heir, and my older sister had snagged the hand of a viscount during her first season. He was very proud of that too. But I was...different."

As Griffin slowly stroked her leg—the sensation was comforting, not arousing—and held her as if she were a child, she told him everything.

Told him about her lonely childhood, how her parents disapproved of her search for knowledge or tinkering with machines and taking apart clocks to see how they worked. Told him about how her mother punished her for not dressing as a proper young woman, or forgetting to flirt. Told him how they pushed her toward eligible young men, well before her coming-out.

She took a deep breath. “And then my father made a business deal with the Duke of Exingham, and suddenly we were thrust into *his* circle. He had been married thrice already, and rumor had it he was looking for another wife. My parents were ecstatically hopeful. They pushed me into his company, again and again.”

“How old were ye?” His touch was comforting, gentle... but his tone was hard.

“Not yet sixteen. I did not truly understand what was going on, at first. Exingham was not charming, but I suppose... My mother told me I *should* be charmed, because a Duke was interested in me.”

His touch had moved upward, and now he rubbed her bare arm. “But no’ in marriage.”

It wasn’t a question, but she nodded. “Of course, I did not understand that. For all I knew, perhaps this was how courting was *supposed* to work. Lord knows I had not truly paid attention to Mother’s lectures. He explained he needed to—to try me out before committing.”

Griffin’s hand stilled, his fingers flexing against her muscle. “Try ye out?” he croaked.

“He wanted to—”

“I ken what he wanted.”

She shivered, hearing the anger in his tone.

Then he relaxed, but it felt to her as if he was forcing himself to relax. Felicity didn't lift her head, didn't want to look at him. Not like this.

Not when she was telling him *this*.

“Yes, well, I was a curious child, remember? I saw nothing wrong with a bit of experimentation, but after I had been with him a few times, I decided I had had enough. On my sixteenth birthday, I told my parents I no longer wanted to whore for the Duke.” She swallowed. “My father slapped me, then spoke to me at length about *privilege* and *honor*.”

“Jesus Christ, Flick.” His whisper was hoarse. “Ye were a *child*.”

“My father wanted a match with a duke. He honestly thought a gangly, red-headed child who did not understand Society had a *chance* at a duke.”

“He didnae want marriage, did he?”

“Not at all. When I brought it up with Exingham, he struck me several times, then laughed and called me a fool.” Her eyes squeezed shut on the memory. “And when I told him I was pregnant—my father actually crowed, thinking it would mean the Duke would surely offer for me—he hurt me again.”

Griffin's arms went around her. “Christ. *Christ*. Christ, Flick.” He sounded horrified, and she decided, then and there, that she loved him.

How could she not?

Best get it all said. “Exingham told me he had sired bastards before, and he had done ‘right’ by them.” He'd said much more than that, but even today Felicity would rather forget. “So I returned to my family.”

Griffin propped his chin on her head as his hands began to move. He rubbed her back and her arm, although she wasn't certain if he was comforting her, or himself, or just trying to keep them both warm.

“Was the pregnancy hard?” he murmured. “Mary was miserable with both Marcia and Rupert, but I was never sure

how much of those complaints were true, and how much to gain sympathy.”

“Did you rub her feet anyhow?”

“Of course.” He sounded indignant, and she had to smile.

Of course he had. He cared for his wife.

The same way he is caring for you.

Was it because she was pretending to be his wife?

What had he asked? Oh yes...

“Bull was a delight, even in utero. Of course, I was young and healthy, and I was determined to learn as much as I could. My parents hid me away from Society’s eyes, and we pared down our staff, but I had a maid—Made’s older sister, actually—who was loyal to me, and would find me the books others might have considered too *mature* for my eyes.”

“Ye were fooking *pregnant*,” he growled, as his palm dragged across her back. “How much more mature did they expect ye to get?”

“There are those who think a woman should be kept ignorant of her own body.”

The towel came untucked and sagged in the front, but Griffin seemed not to notice, judging from his irritated snort. “That’s ridiculous. Marcia’s no’ ignorant of her body, is she? Fook. Is she?”

Felicity didn’t know, but... “I shall help her learn whatever she wishes to know.”

This time his grunt sounded pleased.

But perhaps that was because he seemed to have noticed the towel situation.

Her nipples pebbled from the cold air and the heat of his gaze.

Felicity realized she was holding her breath as his large palm came to rest on her shoulder. His fingers skimmed across

her collarbone in a way that was likely *supposed* to be comforting, but made her shiver in anticipation.

“Then what happened?”

“Um...” What had they been talking about? Oh yes, her pregnancy. “The birth went well, and I insisted on caring for the babe. That was easy enough, since we had fewer servants and my mother had refused to acknowledge the situation, anyway. My father named my son James Lindsay, after Exingham.”

Humming, Griffin’s fingers skimmed lower. “That doesnae sound like something ye’d agree to.”

“I did not, but Father did not ask my opinion. He believed that naming the babe after its father would ingratiate him to Exingham.” She sucked in a breath as Griffin’s fingertips dragged across the top of her breasts, and she knew her voice was strained as she continued. “But he had not realized how many of the Duke’s sons—legitimate and not—were already named James. It—”

When his hand closed around her breast, she sighed in relief.

“So ye raised the lad?”

Griffin’s question sounded nonchalant as he cupped her and rolled the nipple between his thumb and forefinger. She wondered if he realized what he was doing, or if the movement was instinctive.

All she knew was suddenly *her* focus was on said nipple.

Not on conversation.

“Um...” Oh, yes, he’d asked about Bull. “I did. Or I tried to. As I said, my mother wanted nothing to do with us, and Father soon dismissed us as well. It was difficult, but...fun. I had a small mind to mold, and he really was very bright.”

She knew she was babbling. Of course she was babbling. The man was now tugging at her nipple, and she was learning something new about anatomy. Apparently, unbeknownst to most biology textbooks, her nipple was connected via string to

her clitoris, because every time he tugged, the sensation shot sparks through her core.

She squirmed against his lap, wondering if she was getting wet again, and if he was doing it on purpose.

Then, almost to her relief, he returned to his soft caresses, and she could think straight once more. “So how did Bull end up at Exingham?”

Ah, the *sad* part of the story.

“I said it was fun, but...my parents made certain to tell me how I was harming the lad. I did not *think* I was, but they pointed out the advantages a duke could give him, versus a single young lady like myself. And...I was strange, I know. I wanted different things than most young ladies.”

“Like learning about photography?”

“Oh, at that point, I was learning about *everything*. But yes, I was drawn to the fascinating study of light, and the advances being made. I wanted to be a part of that. I told my parents I was going to move to London with Bull so I could be near the other innovators, and...”

His hand moved to her other breast, and she completely lost her line of thought.

Idly he played with *this* nipple. “And yer family objected?”

“My—” Goodness, she was supposed to focus on *words* right now? She squirmed against his lap, and felt something hard and long and delicious.

She managed not to groan.

“Flick, I asked ye a question.” His tone was commanding, even as he tugged at her nipple, sending a flash of *need* through her.

This time she *did* groan.

“I...” What had he asked? “Father told me if I chose to go to London, I would be disgracing the family name, and I would get no support from him. I was going to go, despite his

threats, but..." Her voice was hoarse. She squeezed her eyes shut, trying desperately to get the words said so she could concentrate on what his fingers were doing.

For instance, the fingers of his other hand were now inching up her thigh, the hem of the towel a measly barrier.

Oh God, yes.

"Fliiiiick," he called in a sing-song tone, with a hint of teasing. "Dinnae get distracted."

Right. Just get it said. "I always suspected Father went to Exingham, because the Duke arrived at our house shortly after and demanded I *return his son* to him." Her voice caught. "Bull was five then, and already knew how to read and write and do basic sums, and Exingham had the gall to state I was a poor mother."

Griffin's hands stilled. "Christ, Flick. That's...*horrible*."

"Yes, well, I was quite young, and my family and a powerful Duke were against me. He told me he would take the lad and raise him with all privilege, then handed me a large banknote and told me to go to London and not return. My father was quite smug about the whole thing.

"Did ye ever return?"

"Not once. My sister's husband has occasionally brought her to London, as has my brother's business, so I have entertained them a few times in the last decade. But as far as I am concerned, I am no longer part of that family. They conspired to take my son from me. They took him, his childhood, away from me."

Griffin was touching her once more, but now it seemed more comforting. "I'm sorry, Flick. Was Bull happy at Exingham, at least?"

"I do not know." She swallowed. "He has told me about his sister, and how she raised him, and protected him. I know Exingham wanted nothing to do with him—so why did he take Bull from me?"

Griffin cursed under his breath, then cursed again and suddenly stood, lifting her in his arms. “Because he was a power-hungry bastard, that’s why.”

The first few times he’d lifted her, she’d been surprised and nervous, but now she trusted him enough to rest her head on his shoulder. “I think you are right,” she admitted in a small voice.

Exingham had hurt her, and she’d often—in the last ten years—wondered what life would be like if she’d been allowed to continue raising her son. But now he was in her life once more, and he was a young man any mother could be proud of.

Not only that, but here and now, she had Griffin, and even Marcia and Rupert. Who knew what kind of twists and turns life could take? Fifteen years ago, little more than a child herself, she could have never imagined she’d be in the arms of a man so desirable, so strong, so protective, so—

Her musings were cut off with a yelp as Griffin dropped her onto the bed. She rested on her elbows and stared up at him, incredulously. “What are you doing?”

He was grinning, a cocky grin so unlike his habitual scowl. “Helping ye forget.”

“What?”

His towel fell off. Her eyes were drawn to his stiff member, jutting proudly from its nest of wiry curls, and she remembered her earlier questions about the taste.

Her mouth watered.

Griffin’s hands were on his hips. “What ye went through—that was horrible, Flick. But here and now, ye’re with me. I’m going to show ye how a man *should* love a woman. From now on, when ye think of what ye told me today, ye’re going to remember *my* touch instead. Aye?”

Well, really. How could a woman ignore such a command?

Her gaze still on his cock, she managed a hoarse, “Yes.”

“Good.” His nod was arrogant. “Now, spread yer legs.”

Yes.

Oh, yes.

CHAPTER 20

THE SUN WAS SHINING, the birds were chirping, the flowers were likely stinking up the place and the bees were buzzing annoyingly as they went about their vital pollinating nonsense. And Griffin didn't give two shites about any of it, because his attention was focused on the woman at his side.

Felicity, and his family.

Her hand was tucked into his as they carefully picked their way across the lawn toward the picnic spot the Duke had chosen beside the river. The water was high and rushing fast, but even Griffin could admit that added to the general bucolic idyllic scenery. Felicity wore a hat today, and gloves as well, but they didn't stop him from feeling her warmth as her fingers squeezed his lightly.

He glanced down at her, and she offered him a shy smile.

Yesterday...

Yesterday, they hadn't emerged from their suite of rooms. Dinner had been brought on trays, and Felicity had bundled into his robe when Mrs. Bobo knocked on the door with a question about the new kitten's care.

But otherwise, they'd spent the time in bed.

Making love, and...talking. Just talking. About the past. About the present.

But he'd been too much of a coward to bring up the future.

Not yet. Not until he knew he *had* a future. He'd lost his job at Cooke, Books & Steele, and had no more than a few

months' savings. He might find another clerking job, or perhaps Rourke or Thorne could find him a new place when Peasgoode kicked him out on his arse.

Because after what Felicity had endured—had *overcome*—in her life, the last thing he wanted to do was ask her to take more chances.

“Oh good heavens,” she murmured under her breath as the picnic came into view. “The Duke’s idea of *simple* is anything but.”

Rupert was holding her other hand, and Griffin saw him tug it to get her attention. “The word *picnic* comes from French in the last century, possibly from the same root word as where we get the word *pike*. The weapon, not the fish.”

“Really?” Felicity smiled down at the lad. “You have a remarkable memory, do you know that, Rupert?”

“Yes,” he agreed solemnly.

“B-R-A-V-O.”

That wasn’t a remotely naughty word, but when Rupert huffed and rolled his eyes, Griffin saw a twinkle behind Felicity’s spectacles and guessed she knew that.

Griffin hid his smile—he was smiling more often these days—and led his family toward the Duke’s spread. “And does the etymology say anything about setting up tables and linen cloths and silver out of doors?”

“And wine and candelabra—in the middle of the day!” Felicity pointed out, sounding amused.

Rupert hummed. “No, I don’t think so. But it *is* French.”

“Good point, the French can be extravagant.”

As Griffin listened to Felicity chat with his son, his heart swelled. Rupert had blossomed since coming to Peasgoode, that was impossible to deny. The fresh country air, the huge library, the older men who doted on him...Duncan and Ian treated the lad as a beloved grandson, passing on wisdom and chess strategies and tips on land management.

It was a shame one of them was a traitor to the Crown.

Probably.

Perhaps?

“Griffin, my boy, come join us!” Ian called cheerfully, waving his wine glass.

Shaking his head, Griffin led his family toward the table. “Ye certainly ken how to put on a spread. Did ye bring the entire dining room?”

The Duke was seated in his wheeled chair at the head of the table, wearing a blue knitted scarf which looked suspiciously similar to the one Bull had been working on a week ago, and looking positively delighted with life. His white hair was windblown, his cheeks were ruddy from the sun, and he wore a big smile. “What’s the good of being a duke, eh, if ye dinnae make outrageous demands? Ye’ll learn soon enough.”

The two older men chuckled. It wasn’t the first time Duncan had hinted strongly that Griffin was going to be his choice as an heir, and as always, the idea was a little difficult to swallow.

Griffin wasn’t going to be the Duke of Peasgoode. He was going to expose the traitor and help bring Blackrose one step closer to justice. Then he was going to go back to his almost empty house with his wonderful children, and try to find a new job, and forget this remarkable interlude ever happened.

Numbly, he held Felicity’s chair for her, releasing her hand for the first time that day. He traded banter and quips with Ian, all the while his heart felt leaden and his brain fuzzy.

“Have Bull and Marcia returned?” Felicity was asking, craning her head about.

Duncan reached over and patted her hand. “Dinnae fash, dear lady. Yer neighbor—I still dinnae understand why she’s here—took them to look at the Goesunder Bridge. Have ye seen it?” When Felicity indicated she hadn’t, the Duke beamed. “It’s one of our local landmarks, ye might say. The river is flowing fast and furious today, thanks to last week’s

storms, but that just makes the bridge more impressive. Stands twenty feet tall, ye ken, and the only way to cross for ten miles in either direction.”

Rupert, of course, asked an engineering question, which Ian jumped in to answer. Griffin relaxed when he saw three familiar forms hurrying from the direction of the river. He went out to meet them halfway.

“Sufficiently impressed?” he asked as Mrs. Mac waved cheerfully.

“Papa, look!” Marcia was waving a fishing pole. “I didn’t catch anything this time, but I’m going to come back tomorrow! Ian says there’s trout and all sorts of interesting stuff in there.”

Griffin ducked to stay out of the way of the wildly gyrating pole tip. “Stuff?” he repeated blandly.

Bull shoved his hands into his pockets and rocked back on his heels. “She’s picking up on all the right vocabulary, aye?” He grinned wickedly. “We’ll make a fine country squire out of her yet—”

His teasing was cut off with a yelp as Marcia swung at him. “Keep it up, Bull, and you’ll find a trout under your pillow!”

“I doubt ye’ll catch a single fish.”

As Marcia lunged at him, swinging the fishing pole, Griffin hid his chuckle with a muffled cough. Tutting, Mrs. Mac reached out and snatched the pole from his daughter’s hands as she passed.

“The Goesunder Bridge was impressive, but you’re going to have to learn to hook the worm yourself, eh?” As the lass pouted, the housekeeper cheerfully shoved the fishing pole into the pocket of her apron, feeding it down until the tip disappeared. “And you can dig them up yourself, as well.”

Before it escalated into an argument, Griffin intervened. “Are ye coming to the picnic, Mrs. Mac?”

“Don’t be silly.” The woman beamed. “Or as they say here, *dinnae fash*. I’m fitting in, eh?”

“Apparently,” he drily replied. “But the question stands.”

“I have to return these fishing poles and the three trout to the kitchens.” She patted her apron pocket. “*Someone’s* going to eat well tonight, even if it’s only your new pussy, eh?”

As she scurried toward the estate, Griffin gestured for the children to follow him to the table.

“Excellent!” Duncan declared as they arrived. “Sit, sit! We can begin!” But as they settled in and the footmen stepped forward, the Duke lifted a hand. “Wait! Ian, what was it I was supposed to ask?”

“Oh, yes.” The secretary delicately dabbed at his lips, then replaced his goblet. “Griffin, we wondered if your charming family might like to lead us in prayer?”

Griffin managed not to gape. “What?”

“The prayer yer father taught ye,” Duncan prompted. “The one ye taught yer children.” He clasped his hands together. “Why no’ bless the food, aye?”

Panic-stricken, Griffin exchanged looks with Felicity, then Bull. “Um...fine. Aye. We can...we can do that?”

He swallowed thickly, then clasped his hands. His family followed suit.

“Heavenly Father,” he began, at the same time Bull intoned, “Dear Lord,” and Rupert blurted “Hey, Jesus!”

They all snapped their mouths shut. Felicity, who had raised her pressed palms in front of her face—likely to hide the laughter her shaking shoulders betrayed—suggested in a strangled voice, “Why not go one at a time? As we do at home?”

“Aye,” Griffin croaked. “Like at home.” He cleared his throat. “Heavenly Father,” he began, then glared at Bull, who nodded.

“We thank ye for this food.” Bull glanced at Rupert.

The lad grinned. “Especially the desserts!”

Marcia cleared her throat. “And the people we’re sharing it with. The food, I mean. Thanks for them.”

Felicity’s fingertips were pressed to her lips now, and Griffin couldn’t look at the merriment dancing behind her spectacles, or he knew he’d break into laughter.

Still, she managed to finish the prayer for them. “We thank you in Jesus’s name.”

“Amen,” Griffin muttered, as the children echoed in various levels of cheer and lengths of lag.

He sat back in his chair with a grateful sigh, in time to see Duncan nod solemnly. “Just beautiful, lad. As a man gets older, he starts thinking about Eternity, and it does my heart well to hear the beautiful voices of bairns raised in praise of the Lord.”

“I like pudding,” Rupert offered blithely.

Sometimes it was easy to forget his son was a genius.

“Yes, dear.” Felicity was still smiling. “But this time do not forget to use your N-A-P-K-E-N.”

The woman’s definition of *naughty words* was rather general, wasn’t it?

As the meal began, Duncan and Ian started reminiscing about religious experiences and church services, and eventually began to share stories of past Christmases. The children hung on every word.

Eventually Ian waved his fork about. “But *surely* you have some lovely stories as well?”

“Aye, aye!” Duncan gestured encouragingly. “Tell us about *yer* Christmas traditions! Can we incorporate them here at Peasgoode?”

Christmas traditions? Oh *hell*.

Felicity had paused, fork halfway to her mouth. “You want to know how we celebrate Christmas? The five of us?” At

Duncan's impatient wave, she turned wide, frantic eyes to Bull.

Thank Christ the lad was swift. "Oh, Christmas, aye. We... um...eat food."

"Excellent," chuckled Duncan, pushing his empty plate away. "A tradition I can appreciate. Do ye go to Church?"

"Nay." Then Bull's eyes widened. "I mean, aye. It depends."

"When we lived in America," Marcia offered, her elbow on the table and her chin propped in her palm, "Papa allowed us to decorate a tree, so long as it wasn't too large. I loved stringing the popped corn."

Bull rolled his eyes. "Ye told me about that, but I dinnae believe ye. Why would anyone wish to explode perfectly good corn kernels?"

"I don't know, they just did!" Marcia shot back hotly. "They were delicious, and sometimes Mrs. Mac would let me eat some instead of stringing them."

Ian glanced from one to the other. "Your neighbor traveled with you to live in America?"

"Dinnae be silly," Griffin snapped. "She moved with us *from* America."

"Oh." The secretary shrugged. "Well, I suppose that makes as much sense as anything."

Bull was still teasing Marcia. "And when ye were there, did ye try exploding *other* vegetables? Or did ye stop at corn? Has anyone tried lighting broccoli on fire? Or tomatoes? Maybe exploding vegetables could be the Next Big Thing."

Marcia crowed, "*Tomatoes aren't vegetables!*"

Before Griffin could intervene, Rupert cleared his throat. "Corn is indigenous to the Americas, and the natives introduced the first European colonists to its cultivation. It's suspected that cooking the kernels in oil over flames is a centuries-old method of popping the kernels. Americans have

started grinding the popcorn into cereals and meal, which sounds frankly disgusting, although no one asked me.”

Everyone at the table stared at him.

Then Duncan shook his head. “*Americans.*”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Ian offered, looking as if he was trying not to laugh. “Stringing popcorn sounds rather fun, I would say. Just imagine the *mess*! And God help you if you had any pets—they would make decorating with food much harder!”

Duncan was nodding eagerly. “That’s right! Although I suppose an octopus likely didnae get in the way that much?”

Bull looked at Marcia, then they both turned to Rupert. All three children arranged their expressions into suitable sorrowful visages, made the sign of the cross, and together intoned, “*Requiescat in pace, Snorky.*”

As Griffin tilted his head back to stare at the sky in a desperate attempt not to laugh, Duncan hummed apologetically, then cleared his throat. “Still, ye must have some happy Christmas memories, aye?”

“Och, aye,” Bull blurted. “Each Christmas eve, we—um... we give to charity. An orphanage!”

“Really? That’s remarkable,” Ian offered, “considering in your letters you said you also do charitable work throughout the year.”

“Oh, we *love* charitable work,” gushed Marcia. “Papa has instilled in us the love of helping others.”

In an effort to cover up Felicity’s disbelieving snort, Griffin decided to participate. “Aye. Lots of charity work. We build things.”

“Gruff built that orphanage, for instance,” Bull offered, his expression so innocent it was clearly a joke. “He’s brilliant at building. And verra charitable.”

“I...” Griffin’s eyes were starting to water from trying to keep a straight face. “I am just filled with charity. For orphans.”

Felicity leaned forward. “We love orphans,” she declared solemnly.

Griffin hurried to take a big swig of wine, which resulted in him coughing, but at least it distracted from the ridiculous claims.

Duncan, however, seemed to be truly enjoying the lies. “How delightful! What other Christmas traditions do ye have?”

To Griffin’s surprise, it was his son who responded, and it wasn’t a lecture, but rather a genuine answer.

“On Christmas morning, we wake up early and go downstairs,” he began quietly. “It doesn’t matter *how* early, Mother and Father are waiting for us in the parlor. The Christmas tree is always sparkling, because there’s a roaring fire in the grate, and Father helps me get my stocking down. It’s always filled with the best treats and sweets and delicious toffee, and there’s an orange in the bottom.”

The lad swallowed, his attention on the linen tablecloth in front of him, as the rest of them held their breaths and listened.

“Mother always lets me eat my treats, because she says it’s a special day, and I should feel special. Then we exchange presents. Bull knitted me a hat last year, and I used my pocket money to buy Marcia a penknife, because I knew she wanted one. Then we have a grand feast, and give presents to the servants, and are jolly all day.” He looked up and met Felicity’s gaze, tears in his eyes. “It’s the best day of the year,” he whispered.

Felicity was beaming softly, and Ian wiped at his eyes.

But Griffin gaped, because it was complete and utter nonsense. Falsehoods. *Bullshite*.

Rupert had never celebrated a holiday with Felicity. And Mary...hadn’t done those things he’d said. She’d controlled the household budget with an iron fist, and stockings—the only presents the children had received—were full of practical gifts like new socks and gloves. There’d been no frivolous sweets, no merry feast, and certainly no servants.

And since Mary's death, and Griffin's flight to America with the children, their holidays had become even more somber. Certainly, there'd been the tree and popcorn fiasco, as he'd *tried* to make Christmas a time of cheer...but there'd never been enough money, or time, or energy.

Felicity reached for Rupert's hand, and as everyone watched, squeezed it. "I cannot wait to celebrate Christmas with you this year, darling. Again, I mean."

Duncan called out, "Same here!" but Griffin couldn't look away from his son.

Couldn't look away from the *hope* and *joy* in his lad's eyes, as he gazed at Felicity.

Christ, Rupert looks as in love with her as ye are!

Love?

Aye, there was no use denying it any longer.

Griffin had fallen in love with the infuriating, intriguing, infatuating little scientist. She'd broken into his home, then into his bed, and now into his heart.

He needed her. They *all* needed her.

But how?

The conversation swirled around him, as he tried to consider the future. If only Peasgoode and Armstrong *weren't* traitors. If only all this subterfuge and elephant hunting and masquerading hadn't happened, and the Duke *could* grant them a future here.

Together.

When the food was finished and Duncan asked for a demonstration of Felicity's photo apparatuses, she suggested the shade of a nearby copse of trees, tucked up against the riverbank. Bull jumped to his feet to push the Duke's chair. Ian offered Marcia his arm—she'd somewhere acquired a man's bowler hat, which didn't quite fit atop her braids—and Felicity took Rupert's hand. Griffin trailed behind his family, not certain he liked this internal bemusement.

He needed to be on alert, to keep his senses keen. The series of perhaps-accidents which had plagued him since their arrival at Peasgoode were enough to make any man wary...but at that moment, he couldn't seem to care. If that tree came crashing down, he would likely do nothing more than idly watch, because he was so distracted by his realization.

He loved Felicity, and that could be damned dangerous.

By the time the afternoon began to wane, however, he couldn't deny how *comfortable* they all were together. "Uncle Duncan" laughed with the children and—in between teaching them all sorts of fun things about the Highlands—posed for photographs, and insisted on learning how the moving pictures camera worked, which Bull was happy to explain. And when Ian took Rupert to the roiling river's edge, he'd held the lad's hand as tightly as any nanny, despite Rupert's protests that he was old enough to swim.

"I'm sure you are, young man, but the river is deep and fast right now, and even a full-grown man would be hard-pressed to survive such a swim. If you fall in and drown, it won't be on my watch!"

Now Bull was trying to teach Marcia how to walk on her hands, while Duncan laughingly called out suggestions and held the camera. Felicity and Rupert sat in the grass beneath one of the trees, dismantling the second photography device and peering into its innards. The lad seemed as enthralled with her explanation as he would be with an engineering concern. Perhaps he'd grow up to be a scientist as well.

Hearing the sounds of a horse in the distance, Griffin turned to see a rider cantering toward them.

"Uh-oh," murmured Duncan. "We've been found out. Can the man ever just let us *enjoy* ourselves?"

Griffin was worried the Duke was speaking to him, but when he turned, Duncan was winking at Ian.

The secretary gave a sigh and stood. "John's enthusiastic, and you have to admit he handles your business well. He'll

make a good steward for whoever you choose to hold Peasgoode after you.”

“I ken, I ken.” Duncan waved the other man away. “Duty calls, and all that nonsense.”

Idly, Griffin watched Ian meet the rider on the other side of the copse of trees. The man swung down from his horse, pulled his hat from his head, and swatted the animal with it. The horse turned and trotted back toward the estate, which struck Griffin as strange, as the man turned back to speak heatedly to the Duke’s secretary.

Sucking in a breath, Griffin’s eyes widened in recognition.

It was the hair. The hair he’d never forget.

Wilson’s hair.

The man he’d killed, that horrible night Blackrose had given him his last assignment.

Wilson didnae die.

When he felt a small hand slide into his, he tried not to startle. “What do you think they are discussing so animatedly?” Felicity murmured, beside him.

“I dinnae ken.” But suddenly, it was *very* important.

“That’s John Totwafel,” she told him. “Remember, I told you about him? He appears to be Ian’s right-hand man, he has complete control over the estate. Sort of an assistant secretary, land steward, and clerk all in one. I told you his hair was unforgettable.”

It most certainly was.

Orange, wiry curls stuck out from the man’s head, making him look a bit like an angry carrot as he gestured with his hat to his uncle, then the remains of the picnic, and their leisurely party.

“Oh dear,” she murmured. “It looks like Mr. Totwafel disapproves of Ian taking a bit of a holiday from work.”

“Aye, he always was a prat.”

Felicity swung on him in surprise. “What? You know him?”

Still glaring at the man, Griffin growled. “Aye, and I’ve figured out what the hell is going on around here. I dinnae care what name he’s going by now, but when I kened him, he was John Wilson.” He took a deep breath and rolled his shoulders, excitement humming through his veins. “He was one of Blackrose’s agents.”

CHAPTER 21

BEFORE FELICITY COULD ASK what Griffin meant, he'd taken her by the arm and turned about, so she was facing Ian and Totwafel—she found it hard to believe someone would *choose* such a name as an alias—and his back was to the pair.

“Are they looking this way?”

She peeked over his shoulder, even as she pretended to adjust his necktie. “Ian isn't, but Totwafel keeps glaring at us. Or perhaps Duncan.”

“Or perhaps just me. *Fook*,” he hissed, shaking his head. “It all makes sense now.”

How much attention did his necktie need? She decided to re-tie it entirely, to make it more believable. “Well, I wish you would explain it to *me*.”

Griffin pulled his hat from his head and dragged his hand through his hair, gaze darting about, resting on each of the children, as if reassuring himself they were safe.

“Wilson worked for Blackrose when I did. We never worked together, but...I'd recognize that hair anywhere. I was sent to kill him, and all this time...” He shook his head, obviously still reeling from the shock of discovering his last sin hadn't really been committed. “I wonder how long he's been working for Ian, and the Duke? Just since Blackrose's escape?”

Goodness, neckties were far more difficult to re-tie than she'd expected. “So you think he is still loyal to Blackrose?”

“It’s the best explanation. Far more likely than the *Duke* is in communication with Blackrose, eh? Seeing as how we can’t find any evidence when we search *his* areas. What are ye doing?”

“I am trying...” Felicity bit her lip in frustration. “How do you men manage these things?”

Griffin shoved his hat back atop his head, his hair sticking out at all angles under it, and snatched the ends of the necktie from her. “It’s easier than corsets, I’ll tell ye that,” he announced as his fingers flew.

“True,” she had to admit. “Oh dear, he took two steps in this direction, but Ian just put his hand on his arm and looks as if he is trying to calm him down?”

Griffin muttered something else under his breath but Felicity didn’t hear it, because at that moment, Bull turned up at her side. He had the camera and tripod over his shoulder, and was wearing his usual grin.

“What’d I miss?”

She expected Griffin to dismiss him, and for a moment Griffin looked like he would. But as he finished his necktie, he grimaced. “Totwafel is really John Wilson, one of Blackrose’s agents. He’s also no’ dead, much to my surprise.”

He *choose* the name *Totwafel*?

Bull’s eyes went wide. “So *he’s* the one in contact with Blackrose in Canada? It makes sense. He would have the approval to send information packets easily from Peasgoode, and since he doesnae live on the estate, we couldnae search his rooms for the evidence.”

Her sixteen-year-old son had picked up the nuances better than she herself could. Felicity was impressed. “If we could discover his quarters, could you search them, Griffin?”

“I could, but I doubt that’s the issue right now.”

“Why?” She risked a peek again. “They are still arguing. You could sneak away.”

“Because, Flick,” Bull explained softly, his expression uncharacteristically somber. “If Totwafel is the traitor, he’s already recognized Gruff’s name, and likely guessed why he’s here.”

Oh.

Those accidents he’d mentioned, like the chandelier falling atop the bed where they’d slept their first night? Were they not really accidents, after all?

A pit of fear opened in her stomach.

If Totwafel worked for Blackrose, then he was dangerous. If he was dangerous, and he knew Griffin’s reasons for being here, he might hurt Griffin.

Might? No, he *would* hurt him.

“What do we do?” Felicity whispered.

Griffin rolled his shoulders, his gaze on the Duke as he frowned thoughtfully. She doubted he was even looking at the older man.

“Perhaps a confrontation is exactly what we need. If we can get Wilson to admit he’s working for William Stoughton —”

“Who?” blurted Bull, eyes wide.

Griffin shifted his gaze to the lad. “William Stoughton is Blackrose’s real name. Ye mean, with yer talent of listening at doors, ye dinnae ken that?”

Her son didn’t respond to the barb, but his gaze was focused somewhere in the distance, as if remembering. “*Fook me.*”

“Bull!” Felicity placed her hand on her son’s arm. “*Language.*”

What, you think it would be better if he spelled it?

But he just turned to her, eyes wide. “William Stoughton? Younger son of George Stoughton, the Earl of Bonkinbone?”

She had no idea, and was grateful when Griffin growled, “Aye.”

“Fook me,” Bull repeated.

Felicity’s fingers closed around his arm. She was too agitated to chastise him once more. “Bull. *What is it?*”

There was fear in his eyes when he hissed, “The Stoughtons were listed as possible inheritors. The Duke’s something-something cousins. Fourth, maybe?”

Griffin’s curse echoed Bull’s. “That’s why Wilson’s been trying to get rid of me.”

“You do not know that for certain.” Felicity reached for his hand, and now was holding them both, desperately trying to calm her heart. “They might have been accidents.”

“Now I ken they werenae. If Blackrose wanted to be Peasgoode’s heir, he’d have his minion take out the competition.” Griffin’s glare pinned Bull. “Ye’re certain? The Stoughtons were named in that newspaper notice?”

The lad frowned, his fingers dancing uselessly up and down the tripod. Finally, he admitted, “Nay, but Duncan would ken, would he no’?”

Griffin’s chin jerked once, hard and emphatic. “Aye. Is Wilson still looking this way?” Bull’s gaze darted over his shoulder, and he nodded. Griffin grimaced. “Then try to make this look nonchalant, eh? Oh God, I’m sounding like Mrs. Mac.”

“It will be big in Canada,” Felicity assured him.

Either he was a good actor, or her joke had inspired him, because he was grinning as he tucked her hand in his arm and strolled—nonchalantly—toward the Duke. From the corner of his mouth, he issued orders.

“Bull, round up Marcia and Rupert. Get them over by that tree. Felicity, ye go stand with them.”

Oh Heavens, her heart was frantic once more. “Why?”

“If there’s trouble, I dinnae want ye here.”

Trouble.

If Totwafel—or Wilson—was responsible for the accidents Griffin wasn't sure about, then there might very well be trouble.

With her pulse loud in her ears, Felicity almost didn't hear Griffin's initial greeting to the Duke, but she watched Bull slip away and gesture to Marcia and Rupert.

Oh God, this was happening.

“Griffin, lad, how can I help ye?”

Griffin exhaled, the smile on his lips forced. “We were just discussing something, my family and me. Perhaps ye could settle a little dispute.”

“Of course!” the old man chuckled, placing his palms on his knees and winking. “But I have to tell ye, I'm morally obligated to side with yer lovely wife in all manner of disputes between ye two. Even if she says the sky is green!”

“If Flick says the sky is green, I'd believe her.” Griffin's chuckle sounded forced to her ears, but the Duke joined in. “She's an expert when it comes to light, remember. But nay, this has nothing to do with the sky. I'm wondering about that original notice ye placed in the papers. As ye recall, I thought it was nonsense, originally, so I dinnae recall much of it. Do ye?”

“Recall the notice I placed?” The old man chuckled again. “Aye, of course. Ian and I agonized for days over the wording, and of course it took the better part of a year to find all the names.”

Griffin seemed to be holding his breath. “And ye remember the names? All of them?”

Now Duncan frowned thoughtfully. “I dinnae think I could recite them, nay. But if ye had one in mind in particular...?”

“George and William Stoughton.”

The Duke's expression cleared. “Ah, yes. George is an earl, correct? I believe they're both fourth cousins, a few times

removed.” He slapped his knee. “But dinnae fash, laddie! Yer closer to me than that. We’re third cousins, remember?”

“Aye,” Griffin choked, his gaze flicking back toward Ian and Totwafel. “And...did ye hear from the Stoughtons? Did they reply to the notice?”

Again, Duncan frowned thoughtfully, gazing at nothing in particular as he thought. “I...remember hearing from one of them. The older one, George. That’s how I remember he’s an earl. He spoke at length of his daughter, who just married a Viscount, but Ian told me he had two daughters.”

“The other one is married to a duke,” Felicity supplied helpfully. “But the earl disowned her. She is my good friend.”

“Well, George doesnae sound like the sort of man I want in *my* family,” the Duke chuckled. “And I dinnae believe I ever heard from the other brother. William?”

“Aye, William,” Griffin agreed hoarsely. “He’s in Canada.”

Duncan hummed. “Well, the post works both ways these days.”

“That it does.”

“Say, laddie, what’s this all about? Do ye ken this William? What was the dispute?”

At her side, Griffin took a deep breath. “I think yer secretary, the man ye call Totwafel, kens him quite well.”

“Really? He never said. Och, look, he’s coming this way! We should ask.”

Griffin turned, muttering *fook* under his breath. Then he gave Felicity a little push. “*Go*. The children...”

She didn’t need to be told what he meant. This wasn’t the time or place she would’ve chosen for a confrontation, but it was going to happen. She dropped his arm, hiked up her skirts, and hurried toward where Rupert and Marcia stood near one of the grand oaks, looking confused.

Near enough to hear what was going on, far enough away to be safe, hopefully.

Where was Bull?

She stood in front of the children, blocking them from Totwafel's view, and looked frantically for her son. Why wasn't he here?

Totwafel walked the same way Griffin used to; full of anger and confidence he could handle whatever was thrown at him. It was scary, to think of them going up against one another.

The man had one hand inside his jacket, and the hat did little to hide his outrageous hair. Ian scurried behind him, the older man's half-run, half-hobble not fast enough to keep up.

Totwafel halted near Duncan, making the third point of a triangle with the elderly Duke in the chair and Griffin, still glaring at him. She watched Griffin's fists open and close, the outward sign of his anger matching his habitual scowl.

"Wilson," he growled.

Totwafel inclined his head. "Calderbank. Surprised?"

If Griffin had been sent to kill the man, he *would* be surprised, but Griffin just glared. Totwafel—*Wilson* smirked and slid his hand into his waistcoat. "I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw your name on His Grace's invitation. You're supposed to be dead."

"Aye, I spent a lot of time and money making sure ye and yer master thought that."

"Master?" quavered Duncan, glanced between them.

"And to be fair," Griffin continued, "I thought *ye* dead."

The orange-haired man nodded. "That's the way Blackrose wanted it. Not even my family knows I'm still alive."

Felicity sucked in a shocked breath.

How horrible!

Griffin must've agreed with her, judging from the way his expression curled in disgust. "All the agents who died over the years, their families mourning them...and ye put yers through

that on purpose? Do ye have any idea of the *guilt* I've—och, never mind."

But the other man shrugged, as if it didn't matter. "I've only my younger sister left, really, and she has a good position. Likely doesn't need me in her life."

"Christ, man," muttered Griffin.

The Duke cleared his throat. "Terribly sorry to interrupt what looks like a perfectly hostile reunion, but could someone tell me *what* is going on?"

Ian, who'd arrived out of breath a few moments before, now stepped up beside Duncan's chair. "Your Grace," he began stiffly, the formality sounding out of sorts. "I beg to report that Mr. Totwafel has requested a leave of absence. Before he departs for Canada, however, he apparently has something very important to discuss with you. In your study."

"What? *What?*" The Duke scowled, his head swiveling about as he tried to take in each player. "Why would I do that? He can wait until tomorrow."

"No, Your Grace, I'm afraid I can't."

And with that, Totwafel pulled his hand from his jacket, revealing a revolver. He didn't point it at anyone, but the threat was clear.

Felicity watched Griffin bend his knees and rock forward on the balls of his feet. He looked like a big cat, waiting to spring.

"Totwafel!" Duncan exploded. "*What* is this all about, man?"

"I apologize for the urgency, but I've had a missive from my boss, with explicit instructions."

The Duke growled, "I thought *I* was yer boss?"

Ian, meanwhile, was inching toward Totwafel. "So did I," he muttered.

The orange-haired man didn't appreciate the movement. He swung the revolver up and around, pointing it at Ian's

chest. “That’s far enough, old man.”

Ian sucked in a breath and froze.

Totwafel nodded. “Now, Your Grace, I have my instructions. I need you to return to your study with me. I’ve taken the liberty of making out the new documents, and I just need your signature on them.”

“Documents? What documents?”

Felicity couldn’t decide if the Duke looked more angry or confused.

“He wants ye to declare an heir today.”

Since the gun hadn’t wavered from Ian’s chest, she thought perhaps Griffin’s answer was intended to draw Totwafel’s attention. It worked, but she couldn’t hide the little whimper of fear she made as the revolver swung toward Griffin. It was echoed by the children behind her, and she slowly spread her arms, trying to hold them in place by will alone.

But Duncan was shaking his head. “Totwafel, dinnae be preposterous! I cannae make ye my heir! We’re no’ related! This scheme is already complicated and outlandish enough!”

Griffin’s eyes hadn’t left Totwafel’s. “He doesnae want ye to make *him* yer heir, Duncan. He wants ye to make William Stoughton yer heir, aye?” When Totwafel didn’t reply, Griffin’s gaze flicked to the Duke, then back again. “And I suspect the documents have been dated several weeks ago, so when he kills ye and makes it look like an accident, nae one will question their truth.”

As Duncan gaped, Ian scoffed. “Don’t be ridiculous. We had a new will made only a few months ago. No one would believe that was accurate.”

“I suspect,” Griffin said in a deceptively calm voice, “a large sum of money could make all questions go away. After all, everyone kens the Duke of Peasgoode’s mad scheme to find an heir is a little preposterous already.”

Duncan harumphed. “He’s right, Ian.”

Totwafel hadn't spoken, but the gun wavered between Griffin and Ian, pointing alternately at their chests.

When Griffin continued to goad him, Felicity winced. "The question is, Wilson, where is Blackrose going to get a large sum of money? I've heard he had to flee Britain with verra little."

Now the orange-haired man snorted. "Once he's a duke, he'll have unlimited money and power. Three years ago, he ordered me to find him a title—any title. His brother is an earl, but he had no interest in killing the man. But since his unfortunate sojourn in Canada, it's become even more important that I find him a title. And a duke is second only to a Prince."

Ian was glancing from one to the other. "Is this spy business? I *knew* you were a spy, Griffin, no matter your protests!"

Griffin ignored him. "When, exactly, did ye start working for Peasgoode?"

Totwafel smiled evilly. "Three years ago, when Blackrose started *disbanding* his agents." Felicity sucked in a breath, knowing he was referring to the way Blackrose had started turning his men on one another, allowing them to kill off each other. "Right about the time, now that I think of it, that your wife tragically passed away."

Behind her Marcia growled, sounding like her father. Felicity couldn't allow the girl to do something rash, so she turned and wrapped her arms around Marcia, then held out her hand for Rupert to hold.

Let them think she was comforting them. As long as she could keep Marcia from lunging at a madman with a gun...

Griffin's face had paled at the man's reminder. "Did he kill her?" he rasped. "Did he have Mary killed? And these *accidents*, since I've arrived at Peasgoode—ye're to blame for those, too? Ye're trying to clear me out of the way?"

Totwafel merely grinned.

It was an evil grin, one which made Felicity shudder.

“Blackrose told me to find a position with some rich lord, and make myself necessary. Now I’ve done that, I’ve been able to influence things, and I’ll be richly rewarded.”

“You *bastard*,” Ian hissed, shuffling sideways, until he was between Totwafel and the Duke, only an arm’s reach from Griffin. “We trusted you!”

“Now that I think of it, Ian,” came the Duke’s quavering voice, “did ye no’ tell me it was one of yer clerks’ idea? This inheritance scheme?”

“Yes,” Ian growled, not taking his eyes off Totwafel. “It was last year, perhaps eighteen months ago. You were bemoaning the lack of heir, and how to choose the next Duke. When I mentioned it to Totwafel, he remarked at how very many second and third cousins you had.”

The orange-haired man’s grin grew. “Yes, and you even gave me credit for it, which I hadn’t expected. But it took you two geezers long enough to publish the plan. I had to wait until you officially announced the candidates before Blackrose and I could start working.”

“And now that ye have?” Griffin growled, leaning forward. “Is he returning from Canada?”

“When he returns, he’ll be a *duke*,” Totwafel announced triumphantly. “I’ve fulfilled my mission.”

Felicity’s arms tightened around Marcia. He’d said his mission had been to make Blackrose a lord—any lord. But a *duke*? He’d be virtually untouchable. Duncan’s death, the stealing of the dukedom...past crimes against the Crown... *All* of it would be forgiven.

And she knew, from Griffin’s expression, he understood that as well.

“He’ll no’ be a duke.” Griffin’s warning snarl drew Totwafel’s attention once more. “Because ye’ll no’ get a chance to force Duncan to sign those papers. Ye’ll no’ harm an auld man.”

Totwafel scoffed. “You’re just angry because you want to be the next Duke of Peasgoode.”

“Nay!” Griffin bit out. “I dinnae want to be a duke, but I want what’s best for my children! Duncan—and Ian—are family to me, and they love *my* family as much as I do. *They’re* the reasons I’m doing this!”

Felicity felt tears pricking her eyelids, and judging from Duncan’s softening expression, he hadn’t expected such a profound declaration, either.

He was talking about you.

No, he meant Rupert and Marcia. *They* were the reasons he’d agreed to this mad scheme in the first place. So Rupert could have the education he wanted, and Marcia could have the opportunities she deserved.

Well, yes, he was talking about them. But also about you and Bull. You are his family.

Only for the purposes of this deception.

The truth hit her all at once, and she stiffened.

If Totwafel was the traitor, then the Duke of Peasgoode was innocent. And if the Duke was innocent, that meant she and Griffin and the rest of them had been lying to him for nothing, all this time.

Duncan had found so much joy in the children’s’ presence, and they were going to have to confess the truth, that they *weren’t* a family.

Felicity was so focused on that horrible realization that she missed whatever Griffin had said or done to push Totwafel over the edge. All she knew was, between one blink and the next, the orange-haired man had shifted the barrel of the revolver back toward Griffin, and pulled the trigger.

In her arms, Marcia screamed, but Felicity could do nothing more than gape as, in slow motion, Ian threw himself forward.

Not toward Totwafel, but toward Griffin.

The leap wasn’t elegant or clean, but it put him between the two men, and when the bullet slammed into him instead of Griffin, his frail body jerked with the impact.

“*Ian!*” screamed Duncan, pushing himself out of the chair and falling to his knees, legs unable to support him.

She watched from the corner of her eyes, because she couldn’t wrench her gaze away from the man she loved.

To her surprise, Griffin hadn’t caught the falling secretary. Instead, he’d leaned to one side, so the old man could hit the ground unassisted. But he used the movement to twist, to spin...

She wasn’t quite sure what had happened, but one moment Griffin was standing behind the falling secretary, and the next, he’d kicked the revolver from Totwafel’s hand, then crashed into him.

Both men went down, with Griffin on top.

Earlier, when she’d watched Totwafel move, she’d thought him similar to Griffin. Thought them well-matched.

But now she could see she’d been wrong.

Griffin’s knuckles slammed into the other man, again and again; his torso, his throat, his face. Nothing was safe, not from Griffin’s rage.

Now she understood the scars on his hands.

Is this what he’d done? What he’d had to do? Is this who he’d been, all those years he’d worked for Blackrose?

She whimpered in sorrow. Sorrow for him, sorrow for herself.

Too late, Felicity realized she should have turned the children so they couldn’t see their father’s brutality. Glancing down, she realized Rupert had his face pressed against Marcia’s shoulder, his sister holding him. Felicity couldn’t turn Marcia’s gaze away, and from the fierce satisfaction in the lass’s eyes, it would be a wasted effort, anyway.

By the time she turned back to the fight—if it could be called that—it was over. Griffin was hauling Totwafel to his feet by the front of his jacket. The man’s nose was bloody and he looked dazed.

*Well, of course he looks dazed! He just went up against
Griffin Calderbank!*

She knew she shouldn't be proud of him, but it was impossible not to!

He'd done it. He'd beaten Totwafel; he'd saved them all!

Now, how was Ian—and where was Bull?

CHAPTER 22

HE HADN'T EXPECTED it to be so easy.

Well, not easy, exactly. Rage pounded through Griffin's veins, the monster he usually kept restrained. The monster he'd allowed out again and again in Blackrose's employ, which had broken free when faced with Totwafel's attack.

That monster—the monster he had been—had easily overpowered Totwafel. Wilson. Whoever he was.

The man hung, broken, from Griffin's hold. He didn't trust the bastard, but he seemed subdued now.

Griffin risked glancing away.

Felicity had fallen to her knees at Ian's side and Rupert had followed. She was pressing her small hands against the bloody hole in his shoulder, her expression determined and less pallid than he would've imagined.

Marcia was doing her best to lift Duncan back into his wheeled chair, murmuring comfort to the weeping man.

And Bull was stepping out from behind one of the larger trees, carrying Felicity's camera, a proud smile on his face.

The whole thing had taken mere minutes.

There were people hurrying in their direction from the main house. Servants who'd finished clearing and heard the commotion? Hopefully they'd be able to take care of Ian, although judging from the man's loud complaints, he wasn't dead.

Everything had slowed down, focused, for those few minutes he'd been confronting Totwafel. Now it seemed to speed up and zoom out again, the birds suddenly louder, the breeze cooler.

Something was still wrong.

Shaking his head, Griffin turned back to Totwafel and lifted the bastard higher.

“Ye’ll no’ hurt the Duke, nor me,” he growled. “And when the authorities learn what ye’ve done, we’ll be able to use ye to track down Blackrose.”

Something like desperation flashed across the man’s expression. “You have no proof!”

His bravado wrenched a startled laugh from Griffin. “Ye *shot* Armstrong! Trying to murder me! We all saw it!”

“*And* I have the proof we need!” Bull announced triumphantly as he stepped up beside Griffin, glaring at Totwafel. “I recorded it with the camera! Totwafel shooting Ian.”

Griffin doubted that was necessary—Peasgoode’s testimony alone would be enough to convict Totwafel—but it was an excellent instinct.

He sent Bull a proud nod. “I have to admit, I’m impressed, lad.”

The boy’s grin turned...hesitant. Embarrassed? “Thanks, Gruff.” He cleared his throat. “Now we can prosecute Totwafel, and use what he kens to hunt down Blackrose!”

That had been Griffin’s thoughts as well. The lad’s instincts were good, and he might make an excellent spy one day, if he ever chose to go into such a dangerous field. Griffin realized the thought made his stomach sour, but he tried to keep that from his voice when he offered, “Well done, son.”

Totwafel’s chin jerked at that. “But he’s *not* your son, is he?” When they turned to him, he pushed himself upright, managing to support himself on his own two feet, despite the swaying. “Why do you think I’ve been avoiding you since you

arrived, Calderbank? Oh, those accidents took a bit of time to prepare, but mostly I was researching. Calling in favors, learning what I could about you.”

Griffin’s fist tightened in the man’s lapels. “Shut yer mouth.”

But he didn’t. “You’re not married. Felicity Montrose lives next door to you!”

From behind, Griffin heard Peasgoode quaver, “Griffin? Is this true?”

“Mrs. Mac lives next door,” he snapped out, too angry to be distracted. He shook Totwafel. “Why are ye doing this?”

Suddenly, the man grinned. “To distract you.”

Oh shite.

Years of fighting for his life served him well. Instinctively, Griffin lunged to one side just as Totwafel pulled the trigger on the small derringer he’d had concealed in his waistband. The first shot went wide, but the second dragged a line of liquid fire across Griffin’s abdomen.

The pain was instantaneous, but he made no sound as he dropped. Felicity was doing screaming enough for all of them, frankly.

Jesus Christ, that hurt.

Griffin had the sense to turn toward Bull as he was falling, trying to tackle the young man to the ground with him, out of Totwafel’s way.

But the bastard had used up his shots on Griffin, and now tossed the gun aside.

Before Griffin could pull Bull down, Totwafel snatched the camera from the lad and turned to run.

Griffin hit the ground with a grunt, just about the time Bull took after Totwafel.

The whole thing lasted mere seconds, but had changed the world.

“Bull!” Felicity screamed, and stumbled past Griffin. He reached out and grabbed her ankle, causing her to land heavily on her knees beside him. “Oh, God, Griffin! Speak to me!” She picked up his head and pulled it to her chest, causing him to grunt again.

Half in pain, half in amusement.

“Griffin, are you dead? Please do not be dead!”

“I’m no’ dead.” His voice was muffled against her tits, and he tried to push away from her. “He winged me.”

But she wasn’t paying attention. Her gaze was locked in the distance.

Swallowing down a growl of pain, Griffin pushed himself upright and peered in the same direction.

Totwafel was running, not toward the house, or the horse he’d set free, but toward the Goesunder Bridge.

Stupid bastard.

And Bull was running after him.

Bull, who had good instincts, but fook-all when it came to experience, was running after an experienced undercover operative who’d already shown enough resource to carry a second gun.

Did he have a third?

“*Fook fooking fook fooker.*” The word was a constant litany as he forced himself to his feet, Felicity at his side alternately pushing and pulling and doing very little to actually help. “*Fook.*”

“Yes, yes, you have a very impressive vocabulary. Are you certain you are well?”

“Nay, I’m not *well*, woman, I’m bleeding all over the place.”

Felicity twisted about to watch her son chase a vicious criminal. “Well, *fudge.*”

Unaccountably, one side of his lips curled. “At least ye’re no’ spelling it.” When she blustered, he yanked her to him, planting a hard, fast kiss on her lips. “I’ll get him, Flick, dinnae fash. Ye help Ian, aye?”

“Be safe,” she whispered. “I...”

But he didn’t have time to stick around and guess what she was going to say. With a firm nod, he set off after Bull.

There’d been times in his life he’d had to run, and run hard. He’d been fast and serious and deadly.

This was not one of those times.

The burning slice in his side was making it hard to breathe, and breathing was, as it turned out, important.

But still, he pressed his arm to his side, lowered his head like a bull, and shuffled on as fast as he could.

Ahead of him the two figures had reached the bridge, and for the first time in a long while, Griffin found himself praying.

Dinnae let Bull do something stupid.

If the lad was hurt, Felicity would... Well, he knew what it was like to be afraid for someone he loved. And right now, he was afraid for Bull.

Ye love him. Ye love him as much as ye love his mother.

It was true.

Jesus Christ, he loved Bull the way he loved his own children. Somehow, the little shite had wormed his way into Griffin’s heart. And after years of worrying for his children’s safety, he was terrified he was about to watch his worst nightmare play out.

The bridge was just as tall as Duncan had been bragging, the angle steep. Griffin reached it as Totwafel disappeared over the apex...and Bull threw himself forward.

The lad had finally come close enough to *tackle* the possibly armed bad guy?

Griffin didn't know if that was stupidity or ballocks the size of grapefruits.

Likely both.

“Fook fook shite fook,” he muttered under his breath as he labored up the steep incline.

Totwafel and Bull came into view, rolling about at the top of the bridge, entirely too close to the wooden railing. Totwafel was larger and heavier, but Bull was kicking and biting like a champ to retrieve the camera.

And before Griffin could reach them, could pull Bull from the other man and tell him his safety wasn't worth the proof the camera offered, the pair of them rolled over the side of the bridge.

Griffin's heart stopped.

For one long moment, he thought he'd died as Bull had died, but he threw himself forward to peer over the edge of the bridge...

And there was Bull, dangling by one hand from the railing post.

Christ. Jesus Christ, thank ye!

Then Griffin was lying on his stomach—his injury a distant throbbing as his heart recovered—his hands reaching for Bull.

They caught the lad's wrist in both hands just as Bull's grip gave out.

And then he was dangling there, this son he'd come to love dangling from both of Griffin's hands, looking downward.

...to where his other hand gripped the leather strap of the camera.

The leather strap Totwafel desperately clutched, the only thing keeping him from plummeting into the maelstrom of water below.

“Bull!” Griffin grunted, trying to get the lad's attention. He could hold the slight young man, but not him *and* Totwafel.

“*Bull.*”

The lad turned his face upward, and Griffin’s heart broke at the fear he saw in those gray eyes. Eyes which looked so much like Felicity’s, despite the difference in color.

“Bull, let go,” he commanded, his voice strained.

“Her camera...” When the lad shook his head, his weight shifted. Totwafel slid closer to the churning water below, and Bull’s wrist slipped through Griffin’s hold. “*Da!*”

“I’ve got ye.” But for how much longer? “Look at me, Bull. Breathe.” The lad met his eyes, and Griffin held his gaze, trying to convey how serious this was. “*Ye* are more important than the damned camera, or Wilson. I’m telling ye this as yer father. *Let go.*”

Thank all the saints, the lad listened.

Bull’s fingers uncurled, releasing the camera’s leather strap. For a moment, Totwafel and the camera hung suspended in the air, shock on the man’s face, then he fell.

When he hit the water, he was wailing.

Griffin let out a long breath, then flexed. It wasn’t *easy* to lift Bull, not with the angry wound across his torso, but there was no question of *not* doing it. Besides, Bull now had a free hand to help.

In a moment, the pair of them were lying, panting on the top of the bridge, Griffin’s arms around the lad.

He called ye Da. In the heat of the moment, when it mattered, he didnae call ye Gruff or Griffin, but Da.

Griffin squeezed his eyes shut and burrowed his nose against Bull’s hair, thanking God for allowing him to reach the lad in time.

This lad, and his mother...they were his family. His and Marcia’s and Rupert’s. They *were* a family, even if it wasn’t legal.

This was where his heart belonged.

Now he just had to convince them.

And the Duke.

CHAPTER 23

AND NOW IT was a day later.

Felicity doubted she'd recover from yesterday's horror, but several facts were doing their best to make up for it:

1. The fluffy ball of surprisingly affectionate kitten currently curled in her lap.
2. The fact that Griffin's arm was thrown across the back of the sofa, behind her shoulders, and his thumb occasionally rubbed a soothing circle across her upper arm.
3. The bracing cup of tea she'd just enjoyed from the trolley which contained—she suspected thanks to Mrs. Mac—a bracing splash of bracing whisky.

Perhaps a bit more than a splash.

Either way, for the first time in twenty-four hours, Felicity felt as if she could finally breathe. Relax. *Give thanks.*

The children were spread around the parlor. Rupert had found a book on the birds of the Highlands and was bent over it, muttering about the greater migratory pincushion, or something. Marcia and Bull sat, heads together, murmuring back and forth. The lass seemed to be comforting Felicity's son, and it was strange to see him so subdued.

But still, there was a fierce spike of joy deep in her stomach to see him accept such friendship. From the moment the Calderbanks had moved in next door, the pair of them had

been inseparable. She knew Griffin had worried about something romantic growing between the two, but Felicity had seen it for what it was: a desperately needed friendship.

She'd been right not to board up that secret door; right not to limit the children's access to one another.

And besides, if she had, they wouldn't all be here today, would they?

She sighed softly and tipped her head back to rest against Griffin's arm. He made a small noise, like a grunt. Her gaze flicked to him questioningly, but he was staring straight ahead, frowning thoughtfully, and she didn't want to interrupt him.

The doctor had left him medicine for pain, but he'd refused to take it. She knew because she'd been up most of the night, fretting over him, which had been an entirely new experience. It had made her feel less useless, although she never wanted to experience yesterday's fear ever again.

But...Griffin was alive. Bull was alive. Griffin was, if not exactly hearty, then at least *whole*. Totwafel's bullet had given him a new scar, but only a few inches of the slice were deep enough to require stitches; the rest was little more than burn.

Although it must be *very* painful, judging from the way Griffin cursed about it.

Absentmindedly, she tickled Grumpy Cat's chin, then pulled her fingers away from his too-sharp kitten teeth.

Griffin's fingers caressed her shoulder. "He said he would meet us here?" he murmured.

"Yes. He sent word with Mrs. Bobo and the tea trolley. Have you eaten enough? Do you want another sandwich?"

He grunted again, which was completely unhelpful in terms of communication. As she went to lean forward, planning to make him up another small plate, his hand closed around her shoulder.

"Nay, I'm fine. No' hungry. Just...nervous."

It was so strange, hearing Griffin admit to such a thing, that she turned to gape. One corner of his lips curled ruefully,

almost apologetic.

“Now we ken Duncan’s no’ the traitor, we have to tell him the truth.”

“Yes,” she whispered, suddenly just as nervous. She wished *she* hadn’t had that last small sandwich.

From across the room, Rupert blurted, “*Turdus migratorius!* Ha!” He looked up from his book to realize everyone was staring at him. “The American robin is the *Turdus migratorius* Bull, remind me to call you that sometime, aright?”

“Only if I can call ye *Turdus littlebrotherus* in return.”

The lad frowned. “Is that a dinosaur? It sounds like a dinosaur.”

Bull was saved from having to answer by the arrival of two footmen holding open the door while a third pushed the Duke’s wheeled chair.

The assembled family sat straighter.

Duncan looked exhausted, thinner, somehow diminished. There were bags under his eyes which likely matched Felicity’s, and his shoulders were stooped. But there was a fierce determination in his eyes which she recognized.

“How is Ian?” she asked, knowing it was on everyone’s mind.

The footman pushed his chair beside the hearth, where a small fire dispelled the chill from the room, and turned him about to face them. As he did, they saw the Duke’s tired smile. He waved his fingers, dismissing the footman, then answered.

“He’s as stubborn as ever, the silly fool.” There was a fondness—no, a *devotion* in his tone which made Felicity’s heart ache. “He insisted on joining us.”

As the same footman returned, wheeling Ian in a matching chair, Felicity watched Duncan’s expression. Yes, that was most definitely love in the old man’s gaze, and weariness, and exasperation.

What would it be like, to grow old with the one you loved? To know his foibles and talents and dreams as well as your own? To feel his pain and share in his joy.

Felicity felt her eyes fill with tears.

Tears of *envy*. She wanted that.

For the first time in decades, she wanted that and was so close to having it.

She cuddled the kitten to her and turned her attention to where Ian was weakly protesting the extra blanket the Duke had insisted on tucking around him.

“I’m fine! Cease your fussing, *Your Grace*.”

“Dinnae *Yer Grace* me, Ian! I was up all night praying over yer bloody carcass!”

Ian caught the Duke’s hand in his and raised it to his lips, holding the other man’s gaze. “And I’m sorry I gave you such a fright,” he murmured.

Duncan harrumphed, but was clearly pleased. He settled back in his chair, still clutching Ian’s hand. “Ye have a hole in yer shoulder. Ye should be in bed.”

“Yes, but it’s not the *important* shoulder. I can still write, and I had to be here. I don’t trust anyone else to write up the contracts.”

With a subtle groan Felicity doubted anyone but her heard, Griffin removed his arm from behind her, and sat forward a bit. “What contracts?”

But the Duke shook his head, both hands now cradling Ian’s hand in his lap. “No’ yet. First of all, I believe we are owed an explanation. *Why* did John Totwafel shoot Ian?”

Griffin’s inhalation was long and slow, as if preparing for an ordeal. He held his breath, then exhaled and nodded. “Ye are owed that much, I suppose. Totwafel was really John Wilson, a traitor to the Crown.”

“Good heavens! You mean he actually *choose* the name Totwafel? I always assumed it was an unfortunate ancestors’

misspelling. A traitor, you say?”

“He worked for a man called Blackrose, who is really William Stoughton, younger son to the Earl of Bonkinbone. Blackrose spent years building a spy network—”

“I *knew* you were still a spy!” declared Ian triumphantly. When Griffin frowned, he wiggled the fingers of the arm wrapped in a sling. “You both kept insisting that was behind you, but I suspected—” He cut himself off abruptly when he realized how everyone was staring at him, and cleared his throat. “Forgive me, continue.”

Griffin’s nod was jerky. “Blackrose built a spy network, recruiting young men, lying to them. They believed they were working for the good of England.” Griffin’s gaze dropped to his fists, which rested atop his knees. “They werenae. Blackrose was using the information they gathered to line his own pockets. He deliberately kept them separate so they wouldnae learn of it.”

“But they did?” Ian asked quietly.

Without looking up, Griffin nodded jerkily. “Aye,” he rasped, “And most of them were killed when they did. I...” Atop his knees, his hands closed into fists, then opened and closed again, half-hopelessly. “I killed Wilson,” he whispered. “Or, I thought I had. Blackrose gave me the assignment, the one I couldn’t stomach. He had a lie to justify it. I guess I did a puir job, since the bastard lived. Or perhaps that had been Blackrose’s plan all along; to make Wilson *disappear*, so he could be used.”

Remembering what he’d told her, of how he’d gone to Blackrose and told him he was quitting, Felicity’s heart clenched. All these years, Griffin had thought he’d killed a fellow agent.

She placed her hand against his back, *willing* him whatever strength he needed.

Perhaps it worked. Or perhaps it was the silence of the rest of the room, no one speaking up to condemn him. Whatever it was, he took a deep breath and lifted his gaze. “We thought...

Those of us who'd come out of hiding, and have been working to find Blackrose, we'd thought only a few of us were left. But clearly Wilson had merely gone into hiding too. Perhaps he'd been too useful to Blackrose, even then."

"So Totwafel was just as evil as Blackrose?" Ian prompted.

"Blackrose fled to Canada last year and we've been looking for him. We kened there was someone here at Peasgoode in touch with him, and Totwafel admitted to being that agent."

Unable to stand the tension in Griffin's fists and forearms, Felicity closed her hand around one of his. "He said Blackrose was determined to become a lord. Becoming the Duke's heir—and then removing the Duke—was his ultimate goal."

"Aye." Griffin turned his hand over and twined his fingers through hers, his hold almost desperate. "He must believe, as a lord, he'll be able to withstand the investigation."

"And he believes the evidence against him has been destroyed, yes? So at this point it would be his word against yours."

Griffin nodded grimly. "As far as he kens. We—the evidence wasnae destroyed, and we're waiting to use it."

From across the room, Marcia cleared her throat. "Has anyone found Totwafel?"

Frankly, Felicity had forgotten the children were in the room. Treason and murder were almost certainly not child-appropriate topics. She glanced at Rupert. Oh dear. The lad seemed just as interested as his sister.

She nodded reluctantly. "We received word last night that his B-O-D-D-Y had been recovered downriver. Unfortunately."

"Why unfortunately?" Marcia sounded fiercely gleeful. "He got what he deserved. Bull almost *died*."

"Yes, well, Bull was a bit F-O-L-I-S-H to involve himself, was he not?" Felicity asked primly, shooting her son a

challenging eyebrow. “You could have been seriously H-U-R-T.”

Griffin squeezed her hand. “Well done, ye got that one correct.”

She didn’t seem to hear; she was too focused on Bull.

The lad looked sheepish. “Again, I’m sorry, Flick. I should’ve just given him the camera.”

“Ye were verra brave, son.” Griffin’s voice was thick with some kind of emotion, and he cleared his throat. “But dinnae do it again, aye?”

Bull nodded, his fingers tapping out a rhythm on his knees. “Aye, I promise. But I’m sorry, Flick, for losing yer prototype. I thought it would be good evidence.”

It was Griffin’s turn to lift her hand to his lips, brushing a finger across her knuckles. “I’m sorry as well, love. Yer camera is at the bottom of the river.”

She gaped at both the men in her life.

“You cannot seriously think I would regret the camera’s loss, not when balanced against Bull’s li—L-I-F-E?”

“Life isnae a bad word, Flick. But that camera was *yer* life’s work.”

“Then I will build another one,” she snapped, then forced herself to relax as, in her arms, the kitten gave an angry little hiss. “Or I will write to Mr. Le Prince or even Mr. Edison and share my designs. He has been nagging me for a year to share my progress, and this way we can start again together.”

Bull smiled weakly. “Again, Flick, I’m sorry.”

With a sigh, she settled the kitten on her lap once more. “I love you, Bull. You are far more important than a B-L-O-D-D-Y camera.”

“I love ye too, Mother.”

He so rarely called her *Mother*—usually just to prove a point—that she had to smile in return.

Yes, that camera had been a major part of her life for the last few years, and she'd been *proud* of the progress she'd made on the new technology.

But now she had other things in her life to be proud of. Like Bull himself, or Marcia and Rupert. *They* were more important than her prototype.

Besides, she still had all her notes. Where would a scientist be without her notes?

"I have a question." Ian was slumped to one side, looking pale as his head lolled toward Duncan's shoulder. His arm rested in a sling, and his shirt was cut open to reveal the bandage around his shoulder. He looked half-dead, but his voice was strong. "You said you *knew* Totwafel was in contact with this Blackrose?"

Griffin shifted, then hissed in pain. Felicity's fingers tightened around his but when she sent him a worried glance, he shook his head, telling her he was fine.

That wasn't going to stop her from keeping a close eye on him, though.

"Ian, we said we knew *someone* at Peasgoode was in contact with Blackrose. Frankly..." He shrugged apologetically, favoring his wounded side. "We thought it was the Duke. Or ye. We kened it had to be someone in charge."

"And when you say *we*, you mean...?"

"Those of us who are involved in the elephant—the investigation."

"I'm sorry, did you say—"

"Never mind," said Griffin hastily, lifting his chin. "We've all been duped by Blackrose, and are determined to see him brought to justice. He was the reason I dragged my family to America, to keep them safe from his machinations. Now that we've returned, I'll do whatever I can to see him brought to justice."

The secretary studied Griffin silently for a long moment. What did he see? Felicity was afraid to ask.

Finally, the older man exhaled. “And...is that why you entered Duncan’s little contest? Why you are here, pretending to be a family?” At their surprised reactions, Ian smiled painfully. “I heard what Totwafel said, despite the lying on the ground.”

“Bleeding to death,” the Duke muttered.

Bull spoke up. “It was my idea to write to you.”

“No, it was mine,” Marcia insisted, flopping back against the sofa and frowning at her friend. “Remember? I said—”

“It was *my* idea to enter, when I saw Gruff’s name on that list,” Bull corrected. “But it was *yer* idea to claim we were one family.”

The lass grinned proudly. “And I’d do it again. I knew Papa was worried about money, although he’d never say it to us. I knew we’d have to move again, and I didn’t want to. The listing said His Grace cared about family, and I thought this way we could look like a *real* family. All the other men on the list—Rupert researched them, remember? They were all married.”

Felicity wanted to tell her *You were a real family already*, but Griffin interrupted. Instead of saying the same thing, however, he spoke to the Duke.

“Flick and I—we thought we only had to convince Ian for one evening. That was simple enough. But when he said we had to come to Peasgoode, we kenned we couldnae keep lying. And then...”

When he glanced at her, Felicity offered him an encouraging smile and took up the story. “Then one of the other agents arrived. That same night. He told us about the connection between Peasgoode and Blackrose, and how important it was to investigate.”

“Aye.” Griffin took over again. “He pointed out that as *invited guests*, we’d be able to search for the evidence we needed to prove the connection.”

Bull took over the explanation. “So we *had* to continue our lies. We wouldnae have taken it so far, except we needed to

stay here, to keep searching for evidence linking ye—or anyone—to Blackrose.”

“You arse!”

When Marcia punched him in his upper arm, Bull yelped and leaned away from her. “What was that for?”

“You *knew* that’s why we were here? This whole time?”

Felicity’s son winced and rubbed his arm. “Aye, I’ve been helping yer da look for the evidence. And should ye no’ be *spelling* words like A-R-S-E in front of yer brother?”

She punched him again. “You *arse!* You might’ve told me! All this time, I thought we were just trying to win that stupid contest! Totwafel tried to *kill* Papa, and now you’re telling me *that’s* why?”

When she threw another punch, Bull caught her fist, and the pair of them devolved into a snarling sort of slapping-and-kicking fight which had Grumpy Cat’s hair standing up along his back.

“Children,” Felicity barked. “*Children.*”

They froze and stared wide-eyed in her direction.

Smugness tightened her lungs. Perhaps her parental voice had improved, somewhat.

“I would ask you to *behave*. This is not the place for...” She hesitated. “F-I-T-I-N-G.”

Rupert startled them all when he slammed the bird book shut. It had been easy to forget he was listening. “Flick, I *must* remind you, yet again, that I can read and write and—this is the important bit—*spell*. Somewhat better than you, I would venture. *Fighting* isn’t a naughty word.”

She blinked, surprised, and ran her hand down the kitten’s back to calm them both. “I...am never certain what sort of language is appropriate for a ten-year-old lad.”

After all, she hadn’t been allowed to be around Bull when *he* had been ten years old.

As if Griffin could hear her unspoken thought, he squeezed her hand. “Let’s assume there’s little *ye* might say, Flick, which could be considered inappropriate for Rupert’s ears.” He shifted his focus to the other children. “As for ye two... save yer fighting for later. Marcia, if ye can land five blows on yer brother in a half hour, I’ll consider ye the winner.”

Bull snorted. “And what, I just have to block them? I’m no’ hitting her back.”

“Good, she’s younger than ye. Ye’ll just have to get good at running away.”

Felicity thought that was very unfair, but judging from the fact both Griffin *and* Bull were wearing smirks, she had to assume this was some sort of male humor she was unprepared to understand.

Duncan had been silent all this time, watching them with an incredulous expression on his face. Now, he shifted forward in his chair. “Let me be certain I understand this. Ye, Bull, are no’ actually related to Marcia? Despite Griffin just referring to ye as her brother?”

Her son swallowed, looking chagrined. Well, on the one hand, Felicity was glad he was facing the consequences of his actions, but on the other, her heart ached to take some of this awkwardness, since she was just as much at fault as he was.

“Nay, Yer Grace,” Bull admitted quietly. “My mother and I live next door to Marcia and Rupert and their da.”

“I thought Mrs. MacSquash-Lovin-Doodle lived next door?” Oh dear, the Duke really seemed lost.

“She’s our nanny. And housekeeper,” Marcia offered with a wince. “Sorry. She’s like family, really. We couldn’t leave her at home.”

“And all those things ye told me? About yer lives together?”

“Lies, mostly.” Bull’s fingers were beating a complex rhythm against the arm of the sofa now, a sure sign of his agitation. “We dinnae go to the shore together, although I’d like to. We made it all up.”

“Except the bit about Bull playing piano,” Marcia explained. “And we made up that Papa juggled, but he *has* been learning. We should ask him to demonstrate, though we’d need to find his ball-sacks—”

“And the Christmas memories?” Duncan quavered.

“All fake. Sorry.” Bull shrugged sheepishly.

The Duke was looking at each of them with a shocked expression. Finally, he shook his head. “Nay, I refuse to believe it.”

“It’s true, Yer Grace,” Griffin admitted.

“*Nay!* We are *family*.”

“I am yer cousin, aye, but—”

The Duke’s free hand slammed atop the arm of his bathchair. “Nay, I’ll no’ accept this ridiculous claim. *Ye two*”—he pointed to Bull and Marcia—“fight just like siblings, but ye also support one another. And although ye both tease puir Rupert, ye care about him too. And ye two...” He swung his gaze to Felicity and Griffin, holding hands on the sofa. “It’s clear ye love one another.”

Before she could protest that no matter her feelings for Griffin, he was only pretending for the mission, the Duke shook his head even more violently. “*Ye are the perfect family*. Yer children are allowed to be themselves, no’ to have to be something primped and polished and fake.”

“He doesnae think I’m primped and polished?” Bull whispered to Marcia, but luckily Duncan didn’t seem to hear.

“Ye respect one another—that is *so important*,” he continued, his passion fading. “Ye love one another and ye show that love. Ye—all of ye! Ye are exactly what I’ve always wanted in a family.”

The last had sounded like a plea, and when he trailed into silence, the rest of them glanced guiltily at one another.

Rupert—dear Rupert—was the one to break the tension. “But we’re not, really. Not really a family.”

“Are ye certain?” asked the Duke of Peasgoode quietly.

Certain

Certain

Certain

Certain.

The word—the question—seemed to ring through the silent room, and Felicity would wager she wasn’t the only one holding her breath as they each glanced from one to another.

When Griffin finally spoke, his sudden, “*We are,*” was loud enough to startle Grumpy into bolting to his feet. Felicity gasped at the sensation of the kitten’s claws digging into her legs, before Griffin turned on her.

The cat yowled and bolted for the door. She would have followed, had she not seen Griffin’s expression.

“We are a family,” he repeated sternly, reaching for Felicity’s hands. “Flick, I love ye.”

“No you do not,” she blurted, still distracted by the cat’s escape. “You cannot. I irritate you, I anger you.” When he tugged at her hands, she shifted her attention to him. “For Heaven’s sake, Griffin, I *blackmailed* you into making love to me!”

As Bull snorted, Rupert groaned, “*Disguuuuuuusting.*”

Griffin grinned. “That, perhaps, would’ve been the opportunity to spell something, my love.”

“I am *not* your love!”

“Ye’re a scientist, aye? Let me respond with the facts.” Why was he being so calm? “Aye, ye can be infuriating when ye refuse to do what I demand, and aye, ye angered me, before I understood that ye were right about the whole secret door thing. *But*, while ye might *think* ye had to blackmail me into making love to ye, I’d been looking for the excuse since ye declared ye needed a man and asked me to dance with ye.”

This time it was Marcia who groaned, as Rupert made little vomiting noises. Vaguely, Felicity considered rebuking their

rudeness, but she couldn't drag her gaze away from the man who held it.

“You—I mean, really?”

Slowly, Griffin nodded. “Ye can be infuriating, love, but ye're also intriguing and invigorating and other words that start with *in*.”

“Invaluable?” suggested Duncan.

“Inflammable,” called out Bull.

Griffin just shook his head, his attention still on her. “I love ye, Felicity Montrose, and I love yer son as well. I ken I'm just two pennies above penniless, without a job, and living in a house we'll have to soon vacate. But...” He swallowed, suddenly looking uncertain in a way which made her love him even more. “But I love ye. And if ye would consent to allowing me—and my children—to be part of yer family, I would be honored. And I can swear to love ye for the rest of my life.”

Felicity was...

Overwhelmed. Overawed. Overwrought.

He loved her? Griffin Calderbank *loved* her?

She was still staring at him, eyes wet with unshed tears, barely comprehending the beautiful poetry of his words... while inside, part of her was jumping up and down and punching the air and screaming “*Yes! Yes! Yes!*”

But...

But that wasn't how it was supposed to go, was it?

She swallowed, then swallowed again. He'd told her such wonderful things, but she hadn't had a chance to explain *her* feelings.

“That was...” She squeezed his hands. “That was beautiful, Griffin. Thank you,” she whispered.

“Ye're no' saying aye?” He sounded a bit alarmed.

“I *cannot* accept your kind proposal, my love.”

“Ye cannot?” Griffin’s voice was hoarse, but his eyes widened. “*Love?*”

“Yes. Because, you see, *I love you*. Very much. I believe I began to fall in love with you that very first evening, when you smelled so delicious.”

“I...smelled?”

Rupert clutched his throat and fell over sideways, still making fake gagging noises. But Felicity ignored him as she tried to explain her feelings for his father.

“I love that you accept me for who I am, and do not want me to change. I love that you care for and about those around you, although you try your hardest to hide that fact. I love that your heart is big enough to change your mind. I love *you*.”

Griffin was staring at her, mouth open.

From behind her, she heard Ian’s prim tones. “Then *why*, my dear, can you not marry him? For real, this time?”

And she allowed her grin to bloom as she held Griffin’s gaze “Because, you see, I think you and Marcia and Rupert should allow Bull and myself to become part of *your* family.”

Griffin exhaled softly as Bull let out a whoop and leapt to his feet. Over Griffin’s shoulder, she saw her son grab Marcia up and spin her in a circle, as Rupert jumped up and down.

“Ye mean it, Flick?” Griffin whispered hoarsely. “Ye want to marry me? Be my wife, and let me be yer husband?”

“And be parents—equal partners—for our children.”

“Thank Christ,” he breathed, right before he hauled her up against him, his lips crushing against hers.

Felicity wrapped her arms around his neck and tried not to whimper.

She didn’t know how to spell it, anyhow.

By the time Griffin pulled away, she was somehow sprawled more or less in his lap. The children were chattering in excitement and a maid was refilling everyone’s tea, her gaze down but her lips curled.

Felicity imagined word of her impropriety would spread across the estate by that evening, and she couldn't bring herself to care.

But when she glanced at the Duke, she was alarmed to see tears rolling down his cheeks. He clutched Ian's hand to his breast.

"Duncan?" she asked, suddenly worried, as she pushed herself off Griffin and settled herself on the sofa once more. "Are you—?"

"That was beautiful," the old man rasped. "I think that was the most romantic thing I've ever seen."

"Oh, I say!" Ian weakly protested.

"Well, darling, it's been a while since ye made any grand gestures." Duncan turned to him with a soft grin.

Ian cleared his throat. "I shall endeavor to pick some flowers, once I'm back on my feet."

Duncan patted his hand. "Dinnae push yerself, love."

"Then I shall ask the maid to have someone pick you flowers, and tell you they're from me."

"Aye, that seems acceptable." The Duke nodded to the giggling maid, who bobbed a curtsy and hurried from the room. "She'll see to it, I'm certain." With the tears drying on his cheeks, he took a deep breath and turned back to Griffin and Felicity. "So. Are ye really going to marry? Become a family in truth, no' just because ye have to trick a puir, helpless and lonely auld man?"

"Oh, I say, really!"

Felicity winced, but Griffin chuckled wryly. "Dinnae twist the dagger *too* hard, cousin. But aye." He reached over for Felicity's hand once more. "Pretending to be a family, these last weeks...has been a contentment I've never experienced. I want to make it real."

"I do as well," Felicity assured him.

“Well then...” Duncan’s lips curled proudly. “There’s only one thing left for us to discuss.”

“What’s that?” Griffin asked.

“How soon would ye like to become a duke, laddie?”

A duke?

Stunned silence followed. Griffin gaped. Bull was the one who blurted, “*What?*”

Evidently pretending it had been Griffin who’d asked the question, the Duke nodded. “I’m making ye my heir, Griffin Calderbank. No’ only that, I’m going to step down from my duties.”

Griffin shook his head. “I... Nay, ye...”

Duncan exchanged a positively *gleeful* glance with Ian. “Part of the paperwork and contracts and whatnot—that’s why he’s here, the stubborn fool, because he doesnae trust me to write the contract myself—stipulate Ian and I will live here for the rest of our lives, but I believe ye would be fair about that.”

Griffin blinked, glanced at Felicity, then back to Duncan. “Ab-Absolutely. Of course. But...surely there’s better candidates to be yer Duke?”

“Aye, surely,” the Duke of Peasgoode agreed cheerfully. “There are men who’ve been trained from birth to care for the lands and who understand the nature of responsibility. But I dinnae want a man like that. I wanted an heir who understood love and friendship and fairness. One who accepted others not like himself”—he threw a secret smile toward Ian—“and saw the value in every person’s contributions. A man who wouldnae force his ideals on another, and who treated others with respect.” He nodded to Griffin. “A man like you.”

Felicity could feel Griffin’s pulse under her fingertips. Her gaze caressed his jaw, his profile.

“I’m...humbled,” he rasped.

And she’d never been prouder.

In that moment, she realized she could be proud of someone without any claim to what made them that way. She could be proud of the people Bull and Marcia and Rupert had become, despite not having contributed to their upbringing. And she could be proud of the man she loved, *because* he was the man she loved.

She squeezed his hands, and when he glanced at her, she smiled.

“I love you,” Felicity whispered.

“What do you think?” It was clear he was nervous.

“About Duncan’s offer? I think you should accept it. Not because you want to be a duke—or *I* want to be a duchess, Heavens no!—but because you *would* be good at it. Your cousin will help you with the transition.” Her lips twitched. “Although you will need to hire a new secretary.”

He deadpanned, “Since I killed the last one? *Twice.*”

Tsking, she swatted his arm. “Do not joke about such things. But...yes. Griffin, if you do this, Rupert will have the best education and become the Duke of Peasgoode after you.” She lowered her voice. “Marcia will never have to compromise her beliefs to fit into Society—in fact, she will likely set social standards! Trousers for everyone!”

“God help us,” he intoned blandly. But then his lips softened. “And ye, my love? Yer inventions will become the talk of Britain, if ye’d like. Bull can go to the finest schools —”

“Bull doesnae *want* to go to the finest schools!” her son called out in a sing-song voice, proving to everyone he was listening. “He wants to go to Paris and Brussels and St. Petersburg to study fashion, then come back and use yer money to make a tremendous splash in the style world.”

Griffin’s lips curled, his gaze still on Felicity. “What do ye say, Flick? Want to visit Paris?”

And with that, her entire future opened up before her.

Here was a man who loved her for *her*. He respected her mind and her interests, and wanted to support her. He loved her son, and wasn't going to force him into a life which didn't suit him. *He* was her future.

Griffin was her future.

"I love you," she whispered, yet again.

"Good, because I love ye."

He was smiling when his lips found hers.

EPILOGUE

IF ASKED, Griffin would've said making a duke took time and ceremony. Maybe even a little pomp. More ceremony than signing a few papers.

Well, to be fair, it was more than a *few*. The legal papers were endless, and there were untold letters to be written. Letters to the papers, letters to the Crown, letters to Duncan's acquaintances. A letter to Cooke, Books & Steele to explain Griffin's new position, and that he wouldn't be asking for his old job back, and a letter to the rental company in London to explain he wouldn't be requiring a lease renewal.

He and his family would be moving next door.

Felicity and Rupert had already worked out the bedroom arrangements for when they would have to be in London. Bull was willing to share his chambers with Rupert if it meant giving Mrs. Mac her own room, which was kind of him.

But truthfully, it was unlikely they'd all be in London that often.

Every single one of them had fallen in love, in some way, with Peasgoode and the Highlands. Griffin hadn't lied when he'd said he felt a contentment here, and it wasn't just because he was spending his time with his new family. Nay, there was something *invigorating* about knowing the land was in his blood—even if he had to go back quite a few generations to find it—and he belonged here.

Rupert was delighted to have the attention of two wise old men who doted on him and were willing to help him research

all his questions.

Marcia was enjoying the freedom which came with isolation from Society; freedom to run and climb and fish and do handstands in the trousers Bull was no longer secretly making her.

Felicity loved the fresh air and the lighting, and had already had her housekeeper in London start packing up her study and laboratory equipment. She'd taken over the unused conservatory at Peasgoode, and she and Bull and Rupert often had their heads together in there, studying the schematics her colleague in France had sent her.

And Bull was thrilled to be—as he said it—*home*. During the three weeks it took for the authorities to consider them able to wed, Griffin and Felicity had taken the children to the Isle of Skye to meet Bull's sister Honoria and her husband, Laird Crowe MacLeod, as well as meet her wee daughter Ellie.

Griffin hadn't realized it was Felicity's first time seeing Honoria since she'd left Bull in her care ten years before, but he stood beside her as she'd tearfully thanked the regal woman for raising her son.

Although he couldn't be certain, having never met the woman before, Griffin got the impression that Lady MacLeod was relieved to see Bull settling in so well with his new family.

Did the lad realize how lucky he was to have so many people caring for him?

Griffin had returned to Peasgoode knowing he had a friend in the Highlands, a laird he could call on for support if necessary...and he knew Felicity felt the same way about Honoria.

There were more letters, more contracts, more paperwork. Ian insisted on overseeing it all, although Duncan insisted *he* stay seated. So now it was common to see the pair of them being wheeled through the halls of Peasgoode, bickering or teasing or holding hands. Sometimes all three.

Ian kept claiming he'd be on his feet in no time, and Duncan—smiling fondly—kept telling him not to rush nature.

And then, yesterday, with very little ceremony...Griffin became the Duke of Peasgoode.

Felicity had cried. So had Duncan. But Bull had whooped and pounded Griffin on the back, and Rupert had thrown himself into his arms...and it felt *right*.

Griffin vowed, no matter what the future brought, he'd be a good steward of this land and these people.

His *family*.

“What are ye frowning about?”

Thorne's question jerked Griffin's attention back to the here-and-now, and he glanced at the nattily dressed man lounging nearby. “What?”

“I mean, I ken ye're grumpy, but why *now*? Ye're about to be married, man!”

Felicity had turned down the offer to be married in the chapel, instead suggesting—uncharacteristically shy—that her family might prefer something less formal. So Griffin was waiting by the hearth in the Blue Room, the parlor where they'd first met Duncan and accelerated their journey of lies.

And Bull was standing at his side.

It had meant a lot to Griffin when his new son had agreed to be his witness. Of course, the conversation had been gruff and awkward, until Bull had realized what he'd been asking and made it easier on him.

And then Thorne had conveniently shown up yesterday evening and Bull suggested he stand on Griffin's other side, and there'd been much winking and carrying on. No one admitting to inviting Thorne, but the man had insisted he deserved the right to attend the wedding, considering it was his orders which “brought the happy couple together”.

Bull and Thorne, with their perfectly fitted suits and wildly embroidered waistcoats and shiny shoes and easy smiles... they deserved one another.

Was it any reason Griffin was frowning?

Bull nudged him. “Yer pleats are popping.”

“*What?*” Griffin glanced over to see his almost-step-son smirking.

“Yer pleats.” The lad dropped his gaze significantly to what would be the front of Griffin’s trouser region, were he wearing trousers, then away. “I told ye how important it was to keep the lines straight, aye? When ye wear a kilt, the folds have to lay just so. Ye’re...messing them up.”

Griffin had no idea what he meant, until Thorne leaned in and said cheerfully, “He’s saying yer cockstand is popping yer pleats.”

Jesus Christ. “I dinnae have a cockstand.” He’d been thinking about Bull, for fook’s sake, not *Felicity*.

Thorne winked. “Aye, I ken it. Just teasing ye.”

“Well, shut up. Flick would be irritated if I broke yer nose on our wedding day.”

“Just trying to pass the time.” Thorne straightened, not at all repentant. “Ye should’ve allowed me to hire that bagpiper. At least we could be entertained.”

“Or I could play the piano,” Bull offered cheekily.

“Or ye could both shut yer gobs and focus on this holy occasion,” snapped Griffin loudly.

The priest cleared his throat meaningfully.

“Look, Father, since it seems we’ve got a bit of time, why no’ go visit with Mr. Armstrong and his nephew?” Thorne said pointedly, nodding across the room. “I heard His Grace is in need of new charities to donate to.”

As the priest scurried off, Griffin growled, “Is that true?”

Thorne shrugged. “Who cares? I ken Effinghell has more money than Midas, but he’s picky about how he invests.”

“Who’s Midas?” asked Bull under his breath.

“Ask yer brother,” Griffin replied, at the same time Thorne quipped, “Some guy who was verra rich.”

Ian was sitting in his bath chair and beside him stood a veritable giant of a man, dressed in somber black, his expression blank as he listened to the priest natter on. Occasionally he nodded or shook his head, but he said nothing.

Ian drew the priest’s attention as he began to speak, presumably answering for his nephew, and the silent man just watched.

The Duke of Effinghell, Ian Armstrong’s nephew, was—Griffin could admit—more than a little menacing. Creepy, almost, in his refusal to speak. They’d met shortly after Ian was wounded, when Effinghell arrived at Peasgoode with his mother in tow, so she could fuss over her brother. Ian had put up with it good-naturedly, but Effinghell had been stoic throughout.

Apparently, he’d dragged his mother off to his own estate once they’d satisfied themselves Ian was on the mend, and now he was back to check on his uncle before returning to London.

The giant glanced up, dark eyes meeting Griffin’s across the room, and nodded solemnly. Griffin nodded in return, hoping he’d never have to actually do dukely things beside the man.

Dear Christ, was he going to have to speak at the House of Lords? He hoped not. *Ah well, something to worry about another day.*

With the priest gone, Thorne lowered his voice further. “I’m heading down to Exingham in the morning. Well, mid-morning, depending on how late yer wedding party goes.”

“No’ late,” Griffin growled in return. “Rupert’s *ten*, for fook’s sake.”

“And ye want me gone?”

“*And* I want ye gone,” he agreed.

Thorne chuckled. “I have some thoughts on how we can use what ye’ve learned to entice Blackrose to return to Britain. I want to discuss it with Rourke and Sophia—and Demon if I can convince him to join us. I assumed ye didnae want to be involved in that?”

It was a little alarming, to think Thorne knew him so well. Griffin shook his head once. “Once ye have a plan, I’ll help implement it if I can. But my focus *must* be here, on my family.”

“And Blackrose?”

Griffin paused, uncertain how to explain. “I want him brought to justice. I’ll do what I can to help, aye. For Mary’s sake.” He still wasn’t sure if Blackrose had murdered her, but he would find out, once the man was put on trial. “I cannae spend my nights skulking about in the darkness, waiting to beat seven kinds of shite out of an enemy...but ye’ll tell me what needs to be done, and I’ll help ye.”

On his other side, Bull mused quietly, “How many kinds of shite *are* there, do ye think?”

“Dinnae tell yer mother ye learned that from me,” Griffin warned.

“Deal. And if ye’ll no’ be skulking, Thorne will have to find a new skulker.”

Griffin turned a scowl at his new son. “Dinnae even *consider* volunteering for skulking duty.”

The lad grinned. “I was thinking ye should ask Effinghell.” He nodded across the room. “Can ye just imagine that gargantuan form hulking out of the mist? If I was a miscreant, I’d piss myself.”

“Ye *were* a miscreant,” Griffin mumbled.

“Aye, the best.”

Thorne ignored the lad’s bragging. “We’ll get Blackrose. We’ll bring that bastard to justice, I swear it. Thanks to ye, we ken how to entice him back, and considering Demon’s married to his niece, we have some insider information.” He took a

deep breath. “But first, I think I need to track down Wilson’s sister and explain what happened.”

That sobered them. “Aye,” Griffin agreed. “She deserves to ken, just as ye alerted all the other agents’ families.”

Thorne exhaled. “This is a shite career.”

It really was.

Griffin slapped him on the back, and when the blond man turned in surprise, actually grinned. “Then congratulate me for getting out of it, aye? As of today, I’ll be happily married.”

“Are ye?” Thorne was somber for a change. “Happily, I mean?”

As Bull scoffed, Griffin studied his friend. Well, once they’d been merely agents working for the same man, but now he considered Thorne one of his small list of friends. And right now, this *friend* of his seemed to be deadly serious.

So Griffin told him the truth. “Aye. I love Flick more than I thought it possible to love a woman. This last month, with her as my counterfeit wife, and *this* dobber as my counterfeit son”—he grabbed Bull around the shoulders, hauling him up against himself—“have been the happiest I’ve ever known. I’m ready to make that official.”

The last was practically yelled, as Bull struggled to get away and Griffin tightened his hold until he had the lad in a headlock. The tussle went on good-naturedly right up until the double doors slammed open, and they both froze.

Mrs. Mac bounced into the room. “Ladies and gentle—never mind, there’s no ladies here, eh? Oh well.” She shrugged, then plunged her hands into both pockets of her apron. “Get ready for the bride, eh?”

With that, she pulled two handfuls of flower petals, the most innocuous thing he’d ever seen emerge from said apron, and tossed them into the air. Griffin was grinning as he straightened up, and barely noticed when Bull pushed his hands out of the way to fuss with the necktie he’d mussed.

Rupert stepped through the door, escorting Marcia. Both of them were beaming, and Marcia had deigned to wear a beautiful pink gown to the wedding. Bull had, of course, amended it; apparently the inner lining was nothing but pockets. Rupert was dressed in a miniature version of the MacIver kilt, his expression solemn as he led his sister to the center of the room. Griffin felt tears prick at the back of his eyes when he realized how grown his children looked.

And how much he looked forward to helping them grow further.

And then he wasn't thinking much at all, because Felicity was there.

She was *beautiful*.

Her hair flowed freely down her back, just the way he adored, and she wore a lovely green gown he knew Bull had been working on for weeks.

She could've worn a sackcloth and Griffin still would've thought her beautiful.

He was halfway across the room before he realized he'd moved.

Duncan was at her side, having insisted on escorting her. They walked slowly, each step deliberate, and when they stopped, Griffin was there to take her hand.

So, too, was a footman with the Duke's wheeled chair. "Ah," Duncan sighed gratefully as he stepped back to sit in it, carefully arranging himself. "Didnae expect that wee walk to take so much out of me. Griffin, ye're looking far too handsome in our colors, lad. Thank ye for wearing them today."

Before Griffin could do anything more than nod stiffly, not certain he could speak past the lump of emotion in his throat, Duncan lifted Felicity's hand to his lips. "Thank ye for indulging an auld man, lassie. I've always dreamed of walking my daughter—or granddaughter, I suppose—down the aisle."

Felicity bent over and placed a kiss on the Duke—the *ex-Duke's*—cheek. "I was honored by your offer, Duncan.

Cousin.”

Beaming, Duncan twisted in his chair to look at Ian. “Before we get started, I hope ye’ll allow one more indulgence? Ian and I have something for the bairns.”

Curious, Griffin exchanged glances with Felicity, who was now tucked up against him. When he realized she didn’t understand any better than he, he shrugged.

At Duncan’s signal, Ian tried to bend sideways to pick something off the floor. His nephew understood, and gently pressed against his uninjured shoulder, holding him in place. The giant then stooped and lifted a gaily wrapped box, placing it on Ian’s lap before stepping up behind his uncle’s chair to wheel him silently toward the group.

“Thank ye, laddie,” Duncan acknowledged when Ian and his burden reached their little group. The silent Duke of Effinghell merely nodded.

“Gather round, children,” called Duncan as he shifted the box to his lap. “We kenned this would be a special day for all of ye, but perhaps this is a way to make it even more special, aye?”

Griffin glanced around to realize everyone in the parlor—even the priest—was clustered around them. Rupert and Marcia pushed their way to Duncan’s side, and Bull was right behind them.

When Marcia lifted the lid from the box, all three of them—nay, most of those gathered!—gasped in surprise. A wee black nose, followed by a pair of floppy ears, poked its way out. With a happy squeal, Marcia lifted out the cutest little puppy Griffin had ever seen.

Even Felicity, a self-avowed cat lover, *awwwwed*.

Duncan cleared his throat as he reached for Ian’s hand. “We thought—I ken nothing could replace Snorky...”

All three children glanced at one another, then crossed themselves. “*Requiescat in pace, Snorky,*” they intoned in unison.

Then the new puppy licked Marcia's cheek, and she dissolved into giggles, as her brothers tried to pet it and convince her to allow someone else to hold it.

Griffin turned to Felicity and settled his hands on her hips. "Are ye ready for a puppy, my love?"

She was gazing up at him, her smile a little bemused. "I have never seen you so happy, Griffin."

"Och," he murmured, as the priest stepped up beside them and made a vague sign of blessing over the haphazard crowd. "I'm about to become even happier."

When he kissed her, she wrapped her arms around his neck like she never wanted to let go, and their family cheered.

THIS WAS THEIR CHAMBER.

There might be one day when they'd move into the master's chamber—the one Griffin had told Felicity he'd searched after their first week of residence here at Peasgoode—but for now, the two of them were perfectly content in this room, with its huge bed and warm fire and huge bed.

The bed was rather the focus of her attention right now.

Felicity had dismissed Made as soon as she'd hung up the lovely green wedding gown, and now was so desperate to remove her corset that her fingers shook.

"Need some help?"

She *felt* him—his warmth, his breath—at her back, and immediately relaxed. "I thought you would never ask," she admitted as she leaned back into his welcoming embrace.

As he did once before, Griffin made short work of her undergarments, pausing to tease her and cup her breasts and pluck at her nipples until she was breathless in anticipation. She could feel his hardness along the cleft of her rear end, proving a) he was as ready as she, and b) he was somewhat ahead of her in the clothing-removal-process.

By the time the last of her clothing dropped at their feet, she was panting with need. During these last few weeks, as the banns were read, they'd lived as man and wife. Tonight wasn't any different from all the other nights—and some afternoons, and most mornings—together.

Except...now, he was her husband.

In *truth*.

Their marriage had been blessed by the Church, and by the Crown, even. There was nothing—no one—to take this man from her.

When his fingers dipped into her curls to find her already dripping with need, he growled and pressed himself closer. “Ye want me? Say it, Flick.”

“Oh, God, yes,” she moaned, bending around his hand, hoping he'd take the hint and just plunge into her from behind. They'd discovered a few days ago that the bedposts made excellent handholds.

But instead, he spun her about, lifted her, and marched toward the bed. When he sat on the edge, he pulled her down into his lap. She moved a leg around his waist, then the other, then she sunk down atop his cock.

And they both sighed in relief.

And then in joy.

This.

This was where she belonged.

With a groan, Griffin wrapped his arms around her waist and buried his face in the crook of her neck. Since the afternoon he'd first allowed himself to spend inside her—in this position—it had become one of their favorites.

She loved the way she could wrap her legs around his waist like *this* and hold him like *this* and rock gently back and forth atop his cock *just like this*.

But his mouth began to move across her skin, lower, kissing every available inch, his hands teasing her the way

they had mere moments ago...and soon the gentle rocking wasn't enough. She needed *more*. She needed *him*.

And apparently, he felt the same.

With a growl, he lifted her and rolled them both to the side in one move. She was pinned under him but remained wrapped around him, and he took over.

Each time he plunged into her grasping core, he grunted her name, until it ran together in a sort of prayer: *Flick Flick Flick*. She found herself smiling as she closed her eyes and dropped her head back, reveling in the sensations rushing through her.

Then he shifted his weight to one hand, reached down and cupped her breast with his other. He lowered his mouth to it, and when he bit down on her nipple, she gasped and arched against him.

Her core squeezed, and he hummed, the feeling impossibly coarse and wonderfully warm. Then he nipped her again, and her pleasure burst over her.

As her inner muscles squeezed his cock, Griffin groaned her name once more, then shuddered and growled.

She was still flying high, her orgasm sweeping her higher and higher with each spasm, but she smiled to feel the rush of liquid warmth against her womb.

Yes.

Yes.

Later, after he'd cleaned them both, Griffin gathered her in his arms beneath the counterpane. She was content to nestle at his side, listening to the sounds of his breathing. She was tired, the events of the day nearly overwhelming...

But she wasn't ready for sleep.

Slowly, Felicity became aware that his fingertips were caressing her stomach; just the smallest movements, enough to make her shiver.

“What are you thinking about?” she whispered into the night.

She *heard* him smile. “About bairns.”

“Bairns?”

“Babies.”

She pushed herself up to peer at Griffin. “I know what *bairns* are. I am wondering why you are thinking of them?”

“Is it no’ obvious, *wife*?” His tone was teasing, and his touch remained gentle. When he tapped her abdomen, she realized what he meant. “All this bedsport the last few weeks...”

She sucked in a breath. “Griffin, I am too old to become pregnant.”

“Ye’re—what? Thirty-two? Mary was aulder than that when Rupert was born.”

The thought of another baby—an idea both wonderful and terrifying all at once—was pushed aside by that somber reminder. She pressed a kiss to his shoulder.

“Do you miss her terribly?”

He didn’t answer for a long while, and when he did, he didn’t pretend to misunderstand. “Mary and I were... compatible. I didnae love her, although she likely deserved better than me. She handled our home, and didnae particularly enjoy my touches. I thought we were happy, in the same day-to-day sort of way our parents existed. But...now I see neither of us understood what that meant.”

“I am sorry,” she whispered.

“Aye, I’m sorry she’s gone, as well, and I’m sorry she never had the chance for *this*.” His arm tightened around her just before he rolled up on one elbow, which pushed her onto her back. “I’m sorry I wasnae able to make her scream my name in bed.”

Felicity’s lips twitched. “As I recall, *you* were the one screaming *my* name.”

“Screaming? Och, nay.” He lowered his lips to the upper swell of her breast. “I dinnae scream.”

“You most certainly—*oh*.” She sucked in a breath as his tongue flicked across her nipple. “What are you doing?”

“Distracting ye from depressing thoughts. Is it working?”

She curled her fingers through his hair. “Well, yes, *husband*. But I think it is important to discuss the past—” She bit off her words with another gasp as his teeth grazed her tender bud.

“Flick,” he said seriously, apparently to her nipple, “this is our wedding night. I love ye, and ye love me. The past is behind us, where it belongs. Now, will ye shut up and let me love ye?”

His fingers found her curls, and he began to tease her clitoris. She squirmed beneath his ministrations. “Well, Griffin?” she panted. “Which one is it?”

“Is what?”

“Do you want me to shut up, or to scream your name?”

In the firelight, she could see his grin. It was nothing short of wicked.

“Och, lass, I’ll have ye screaming in no time,” he vowed, as he lowered his mouth once more.

And he held true to that promise.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

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On Historical Accuracy

Well, hello there.

This is the part in the book where we talk about the actual history, because—as should have been obvious—I wasn't too fussed about it during the previous twenty-something chapters.

But since I call myself a historical romance author (even if I'm writing romcoms), I'm morally—if not legally—required to point out that I do know some shit, believe it or not.

So, starting at the beginning, did you read my note to you way back before the book began? It's still true. I just knew, with the book starting out the way it did—with a ridiculous premise—I needed to point out the absurdity of it, so we could all get that out of the way.

Duke's heirs are not chosen by newspaper contests.

But for that matter, historical dukes are rarely young, hot, unmarried and syphilis-free and with all their own teeth, so we're probably about even when it comes to suspension of disbelief.

Quick note about the series itself: it's called *Surprise! Dukes* (did you do the jazz hands? You have to do the jazz hands. *Surprise! Dukes*) for a reason. I wanted my heroes to become dukes in unexpected ways, not just the old "I'm a second son whose big brother died, boohoo." While this particular premise is one of the more ridiculous, I'd like to

point out that I *did* manage to make Griffin a duke before the book ended, in order to deliver on the book's title.

Side note:

In the original outline of this book, Duncan (the Duke) was supposed to die toward the end. This would make Griffin the new Duke of Peasgoode, huzzah. But the more Duncan appeared on the page, the more in love with him I fell, and I knew I couldn't break Ian's heart by killing him off, so I made up the bit about him abdicating, which is also rubbish.

If you're a duke, it's complete nonsense to believe you can just...give it up because you're tired of duking.

But look, you've probably come to expect nonsense from me, right?

I do want to briefly give a shout-out to Duncan and Ian's longtime partnership; you'll notice I never defined it, or used the term "gay" in the book. You'll also notice my characters accept the fact these two men have a love which is different from theirs. *This* is one area of history where I'm not bullshitting you.

Same sex relationships have been a reality throughout human history. At certain times, in certain places, they were more accepted than others, which meant they were recorded... but rest assured, homosexuality is not a modern invention.

"Oh, sure, Caroline, they might've existed, but they weren't public about it! They had to keep their love a secret! They would've never been allowed to live their lives openly and freely!"

To which I say, "...oh, really? Wanna bet?"

In Victorian London, there were thriving gay communities full of men who were able to live their love. Is it so hard to believe my duke—who, let's be honest, is just adorable—and his life companion, who live in the middle of nowhere, could hire a staff loyal to him and thus suppress rumors or hate?

If you're interested in learning more about the history of male-male relationships in Victorian Britain, I encourage you to pick up Merry Farmer's *The Brotherhood* series. Her

author's notes are always brilliant defenses for the state of gay love and marriage in that time and place.

They're not as funny as my author's notes, though, *pshaw*.

Let's see, what else? Well, my editor, upon reading the charades scene, wanted me to tell you that the plunger was invented in the 1870s, and was called a "force cup". There. Plungers were a *thing*...I just liked the idea of Rupert referencing the future of toilet design.

While we're talking real social history, let me give a shout-out to Marcia (yes, whom I named after my mother). She is very loosely based on Millicent Fawcett, the incredible badass who helped extend the rights of women in the UK, with the support of a loving and accepting family. *She* didn't insist on wearing trousers, however.

Fawcett and Emmeline Pankhurst and so many others like them were at the forefront of the women's rights movement in the 1870s and 1880s. The movement drew attention to issues such as women's lack of legal rights and their unequal treatment in the workplace. In 1878, the Women's Property Act was passed, allowing married women to own and control property in their own right. This was followed by the Married Women's Property Act of 1882, which further extended women's property rights.

Marcia is too young to have fought for those Acts, but you can absolutely believe, in a decade, she's one of the women who marched and fought and chained herself to doors in order to ensure women had the right to vote. Thanks, Marcia!

Okay, while I'm rambling about characters, let me take you aside and talk about Bull.

Oh, Bull.

So, Bull first appeared in *The Sinner's Tempting Captor* basically because I needed a chaperone for Honoria and Crowe's road trip. I was bemoaning this to my husband *the day before* I had to start writing their story (because, I mean, what's wrong with procrastination?) and he said "You can do this! You can come up with the chaperone! Just grab your

subconscious, shake it around a little bit, and say ‘*Listen here, you little shite!*’...”

And just like that, Bull was born, in all of his cocky, charming, goofiness. He was a fan favorite in that book, so I had to bring him back for this series. Luckily, Past Caroline never said his mother was *dead*, just that she’d dropped him off at Exingham...

So clearly, he’s back. I actually like him better in this book, I think his character has matured. I hope I wasn’t the only one who melted a bit when he looked up at Griffin and called him “Da”? As a parent of a teenaged son, I know how special those moments can be when they break down their walls of bravado and testosterone to show you their vulnerability.

Of course, Bull wasn’t the only character who appeared in past books; Felicity was important in *The Duke’s Bartered Mistress* (I had her mention the fact she’d trained herself not to slip into her Lowland brogue in this book, because I decided I could only handle so many accents in each book). And Calderbank (and Wilson, for that matter) appeared on Blackrose’s stolen list in *The Duke’s Deceitful Governess*.

I hope I did an okay job of summarizing the plots of those two books, so if you haven’t read them, you still knew what was going on. But seriously; if you haven’t, what are you waiting for? They’re hilarious, super-sexy, and lots of *fun!*

One more set of characters who need to be mentioned: the cats.

Felicity’s cats are her photography subjects (which is adorable and also a little sad, to realize she had no family/friends to practice on all these years). Therefore, they are named after Internet memes (except Miss Pretty-paws, who was named by Bull a long time ago). Some of you may have already picked up on that (I hope most of you; otherwise I’ll be embarrassed my joke fell flat), and if not, feel free to google some of the internet’s most famous cat memes:

- I can haz cheezburger?

- Long cat
- Grumpy cat
- Nyan cat
- Ceiling cat
- If it fits, I sits

Speaking of Felicity's photography, here comes the technical part of the author's note.

What? Gah, Caroline, I didn't come here to be bored.

Tough shite, buttercup. Sit down, I'ma learn you a thing or two.

Okay, let's start out with the obvious: Felicity Calderbank wasn't the inventor of the moving picture camera (although wouldn't it be fabulous if she was and I wrote this whole book and then announced that? Hahahaha!).

Instead, that honor goes to the man who she mentions throughout the story: Louis Le Prince. Le Prince was French, but by the time this book takes place, he was working in America. He later moved to Leeds in 1887, where he recorded the first-ever cinematographic film, the *Roundhay Garden Scene* in 1888. (Go to YouTube and watch it. It's a two-second long clip of four people dancing, and it's just completely charming.)

So in my story, Felicity's prototype camera is destroyed, but she realizes it's not important to get the credit for the invention. It's more important for her to be with her family, and she decides to collaborate with Mr. Le Prince. In my imagination, she spends the next few years corresponding with Le Prince, sharing ideas and innovations, until he is able to produce a film which can be viewed by everyone.

How did these cameras work?

You know those spinning discs where you look through a little peep hole and if the disc is spinning fast enough, the series of pictures appear one after another and look like a stop-motion video of a horse galloping? Well, we're not talking about those. We're talking about actual video cameras.

Le Prince's camera used a rotating disc with four lenses arranged in a diamond pattern. As the disc rotated, each lens would briefly capture a series of images on a single photographic plate. These images were then projected back through the lenses in rapid succession, creating the illusion of motion. The camera was hand-cranked, allowing the operator to control the speed at which the images were captured.

The camera itself was relatively small and portable, making it ideal for capturing footage in a variety of settings. Despite its innovative design, Le Prince's camera was not widely adopted by the film industry, and he was never able to fully capitalize on his invention (see the juicy gossip, below). However, his pioneering work laid the foundation for many of the motion picture technologies that followed, and he is now widely regarded as one of the fathers of modern cinema.

Remember how Felicity mentioned not trusting Edison?

Well, she had good reason. As my developmental editor says (Hi Alyssa!), Thomas Edison was excellent at recognizing the brilliant ideas of others, developing them into marketable products that would make money, underpaying the actual inventor, and taking the credit for himself.

Edison was the one who was granted the patent for the first motion picture camera (the Kinetograph), and within a decade was using these things to film "movies" and then project them in public screenings. He was also the one who first showed movies with synchronized "sound tracks" (music or sometimes voices) played separately (because of course the early films had no sound).

So while inventors like Le Prince (and Felicity) were clearly pushing the boundaries of what was possible, Edison was looking at these inventions and going, "Yes, but how do we make money with this?" I mean, no shade to Edison; he was clearly brilliant. I just wanted you to understand why Felicity might not trust her invention to him.

I promised you juicy gossip, right?

Okay, so in 1890, Le Prince decided *he* should get credit for this fabulous invention, and he planned this big

demonstration tour in the US. He sent his family on ahead, but he popped over to France to visit his brother in Dijon, then climbed aboard the train to Paris to start his trans-Atlantic voyage.

Except he never arrived in Paris.

Dun-dun-duuuunnn!

There are so many interesting theories (conspiracy and believable) surrounding Le Prince's disappearance, but most of them agree he died that day. Was it an assassination ordered by Edison, who saw him as a competitor? A suicide caused by Le Prince's mounting debts and the belief he'd never be able to compete? Or did he simply disappear, and live the rest of his life in obscurity?

His widow and son believed him dead, that was for certain, and continued to campaign for Le Prince's recognition as the "Father of cinematography".

With a little help, ya know, from Felicity Montrose Calderbank.

So there we are, quite a few pages later, and I'm sure there's still plenty of stuff I can talk about in this story. However, it's already the longest book I've ever written (eleventy-billion pages), so I'm going to wrap it up.

Just like the end of *The Duke's Bartered Mistress*, I'm warning you that I'm taking the next book in an unexpected direction. No, it's *still* not Thorne's turn for love.

The next book, ***The Duke's Daring Bride***, is a marriage-of-convenience trope featuring the silent Duke of Effinghell... and Totwafel's sister.

Ha! Didn't see that coming, did you?

Why doesn't Ian Armstrong's nephew, the hulking duke, speak? And why would he propose a marriage of convenience with a bumbling, cheese-loving newspaper owner? Find out in ***The Duke's Daring Bride***!

You can keep reading for a sneak peek. 😊

But first, I want to issue a personal invite to my reader group. [Caroline's Cohort](#) is an active community, where we talk all things Scottish, funny, delicious, and wild. My Cohort is instrumental in helping me choose covers and character names; they named quite a few of the characters in this book (Shout-out to Leslie for lending me Snorky's name). Come hang out with us; you're going to have fun!

And if you're on Facebook, have you joined the group *Historical Harlots*? Over five thousand members strong, this is a great group to chat about all the best parts of HistRom!

And now, for the Duke of Effinghell...

SNEAK PEEK

From *The Duke's Daring Bride*

Alistair Kincaid, the fifth Duke of Effinghell, was hiding from his mother. Or, to be rather more precise, his mother's cock—

Cockatoo? Cockatiel? Cock-something.

Parrot. Just call it a parrot.

“Alistair! Alistair, darling, I *know* you are in here. Oh, where is that blasted light?”

“I smell ye, ye dumb shite!”

Hamish might very well smell Alistair, anything was possible. But Alistair wasn't going to announce himself—for more than one reason.

He was well and truly trapped; it was impossible to deny. The gold parlor had only the one entrance and exit, and Mother was standing in front of it. Why in the hell was she traipsing about at this hour, with Hamish to boot? They should be asleep, like normal humans.

And parrots.

“Alistair, I *saw* you come in—oh! I found it.”

In the moment before Mother found the light, Alistair threw himself into one of the chairs by the window, so she wouldn't find him skulking in the curtains like a housebreaker. Which, if one was getting technical, he was.

“Darling, *what* are you doing, sitting here in the dark?” Mother asked as she swept further into the room, now that she

could see.

Calmly, Alistair lifted the paper—yesterday’s—from the small table beside him and made a show of reading it.

Mother scoffed. “I cannot believe you have been sitting here just waiting for me to find the lights, so you might read that paper. It is almost midnight!”

Alistair glanced at the clock, then inclined his chin in agreement. It *was* almost midnight.

Which meant he was late.

“I am not going to ask you why you are still awake, darling, but you *must* give me a moment of your time. I have been trying to track you down all day.”

The townhouse was large by London standards, but not so large she couldn’t find him if necessary. But Alistair would be the first to admit he lived a busy life. Since he never appeared in public—not as the Duke of Effinghell, at least—he ran his estate business from his study. His days were spent in correspondence with his stewards, and writing spiritedly persuasive letters to the papers and to his contemporaries in the House of Lords.

He might not *speak* to them, but he could damn well influence their social reform voting habits.

And for all he knew, Mother *had* been trying to pin him down. Yet again. As if he didn’t know what she wanted.

So he made a show of folding the paper and laying it across the boot which rested atop the opposite knee. Relaxed. At ease. Not at all concerned about the coming attack.

Mother, knowing him as well as anyone, sighed hugely. “Do not give me that *put upon* act, Alistair. You *know* I have your best interest at heart.”

His, and the dukedom’s. Yes.

“Your sisters need a woman’s influence.”

He raised a brow and swept his gaze down her dressing gown, which caused her to huff.

“Besides *me*. I know I am a perfectly respectable influence, and I am *quite* pleased with managing to get Penelope married off to Tuckinroll last year. Or was it the year before last?”

Two years ago, and anyone with brains can tell she's miserable.

But as long as Tuckinroll didn't hurt her, Alistair wasn't going to intervene until she asked. If she ever wanted out of her marriage, he'd support her, but he was the first to admit he didn't know his younger sisters well; perhaps a loveless marriage to an old lecher is what they *wanted*...as long as the lecher was a duke.

Who was he to judge?

She waved away her confusion. “The point *is*, Amanda and Amelia need to find matches. And since you refuse to escort them in Society, they have had less opportunity to find husbands.”

Amanda had declared she wouldn't be finding a husband, but leave it to Mother to refuse to acknowledge her wishes. He continued to stare blandly, until she rolled her eyes.

“Yes, I *know* you could just ask one of your friends to escort them—escort *us*. And yes, I am certain they are charming. Young Kipling was my favorite—too bad he ran off to France or Prussia or wherever. But even *he* could not open the doors you can.”

Abruptly, Alistair stood, tossing the paper back to the chair. He didn't have time for these complaints, and apparently his mother could read his impatience, because she held up a hand.

“My *point*, Alistair, is that you need to marry.”

Oh God, not this again.

Mother, of course, knew his arguments. “Yes, this again. Now, thanks to our efforts six months ago—when you came *this close* to taking this seriously—you have the special license already. It is in the top drawer of your desk, I know. You must marry!”

One of his brows slowly rose in a silent challenge and she huffed. “You *need* to marry, to begat an heir. You know—we both know—how easily tragedy can strike. Do you really want Barty to inherit?”

Bartholomew—his father’s cousin—had always slavered after the estate. He was close to eighty, weighed twenty stone, and thought a sixth round of drinks counted as *haut cuisine*. God knew what he’d manage to do with Effinghell if he had access to those resources and influence.

No, of course he didn’t want *Barty* to inherit. And yes, he knew very well how quickly tragedy could strike. But no man likes to think about his own death...

Alistair scowled and pointed bitterly to his throat. He might be a duke—one who wasn’t an old lecher—but he was most definitely defective. He wasn’t in a position to offer for the diamonds of Society.

Mother’s expression softened. “Oh, Alistair.”

“*Buck up, ye wee fooker,*” snapped Hamish.

“Yes, yes,” she cooed, stroking the bird’s top feathers. “Do hush.” She inhaled and squared her shoulders. “I think you should be aware that you *are* a catch, Alistair. If Penelope could be happy with Tuckinroll, surely you can see how any titled, eligible young lady would be delighted by your suit?”

What a *fooking* terrible example.

Penelope only married Tuckinroll because their mother had pushed her into it, and Alistair had failed in his duty as a brother to escort her in Society and find someone more suitable.

He blew out a breath in frustration.

Hell.

He had no desire to parade in front of Society’s cruel mockery, and hear their gleeful whispers, as if he were deaf as well as mute. And he *certainly* didn’t want to do it to find out which one of the simpering, spiteful bitches—the ones who smiled becomingly, then tittered behind their fans when they

thought he couldn't hear—would be willing to lower herself to marry him.

If that's what it would take, Barty-the-drunk was looking better and better as an heir...

It wasn't as though he'd be around to suffer it.

“Darling...” Mother was still stroking Hamish. “I understand. Truly I do. But *try* to understand. For your sister's sakes, you *must* find a suitable bride.”

He snorted.

A suitable bride? *Any* bride who wanted a man like him would have to be truly desperate.

Reaching for his hat, he gave his mother a curt nod, his way of telling her he'd consider her words. He doubted he'd do much *besides* consider them, even when his mind should be on his night's work.

“Alistair!” she gasped, pulling her arm—the one holding the bird—against her chest. This allowed Hamish to peck at the lace of the mop cap she wore over her hair. “Ow! Shite, you naughty thing!” she scolding, pulling him back again.

“*Shite ye naughty thing!*” Hamish repeated.

Mother flapped her other hand at her pet, trying to shut him up, as her gaze swung back to Alistair. Her surprise turned to irritation as she finally *looked* at what he wore. “You are going back out again, are you not? Do not think to lie, young man, I can see you. Dressed all in black—those trousers came from the rubbish bin, did they not?”

Black was a perfectly respectable color.

And he hadn't been a *young man* in a long time.

He settled his hat atop his head.

Yes, he was going back out.

As he tried to brush past her, Mother stopped him with a hand on his arm, and he turned to peer down into her eyes.

“Be careful, darling,” she whispered. “I worry so, knowing what you are pitting yourself against.” She squeezed his arm. “I shall spend the night praying for your safety, and for you to one day understand the danger you put myself and your sisters in by taking such chances.”

Alistair felt his lips curl at her melodrama.

“*Good luck, ye bastard,*” quipped Hamish.

Bending down—he stood taller than all men of his acquaintance, and towered nearly a foot over his mother—he brushed a kiss across her forehead, then tickled the bird behind his head.

“*Again, please!*”

Since Hamish said *please*, Alistair obliged, then smiled at his mother.

She might intend to stay up all night praying, but he knew she’d be snoring before the hour was out.

He, meanwhile, had work to do.

There were things he could do to improve the world as the Duke of Effinghell, and things he could do as himself. The papers had started calling him *The Menace*, and although he’d never admit it, the name suited him.

And tonight, he’d do what he could to make London a better place for those who had been forgotten...and he’d do his best to forget his mother’s nagging.

A bride?

He snorted as he slipped out of the back door and into the mews.

A woman, willingly marry him?

She’d have to be truly desperate.

Oh gosh, Caroline, foreshadowing much? Why doesn't Alistair speak? What is he doing gallivanting about after midnight in the bad part of town? Find out in *The Duke's Daring Bride*